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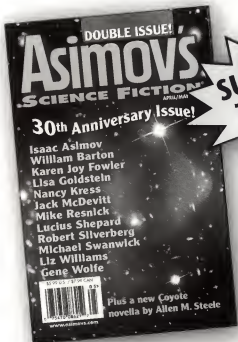
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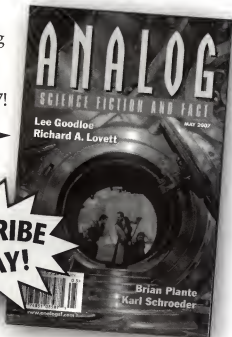
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## SCIENCE FICTION

FEBRUARY 2008

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## MY ROWBOAT

The roots of modern fiction, we are told, can be traced to the oral tales passed down by generations of storytellers of all levels of accomplishment. My own introduction to science fiction certainly came about in that way. As I mentioned in my January 2005 editorial, my first memory of SF is my father relating Edgar Rice Burroughs's *A Princess of Mars*. The book was probably out of print and unavailable from our tiny country library, so he recounted the tale as a goodnight story from his own memory. Of course, unlike the bards of old, he wasn't a trained storyteller, and I'm sure details were lost in the retelling. He had me mesmerized as he described John Carter's desperate race into a cave in an attempt to escape a band of Apaches. Like Burroughs, my father didn't describe what the pursuers saw when they suddenly gave up the chase, but my dad's depiction of their reaction easily convinced me that, if he hadn't escaped to Mars, something truly horrible lay in wait for the hero. Although John Carter revisits the cave at the end of the book, I don't think my father brought him back there in his tale. I'm pretty sure that he couldn't remember what was in the cave and so omitted it from his own version of Burroughs's story. When I finally read the novel, I was thrilled to discover that the mystery was solved but disappointed to find that the sight that met John Carter upon his re-

turn from Mars wasn't nearly as terrifying as the one in my imagination.

I'm sure my father picked up his talent for storytelling from his parents, since both were avid practitioners of that tradition. My introduction to Damon Knight's eerie "To Serve Man," Richard Matheson's *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, and George Langelaan's "The Fly" was via stories told to me by my grandfather. Since years passed between my grandfather's rendition of that last tale and my own reading of it in an anthology, and since I've never seen either movie version, I know that my vivid image of the fly/man's pathetic cry for help in the story's famous last scene comes more from my grandfather than from the printed page.

My grandfather was a firefighter who loved books, but I'm not sure how much time he had left over for reading fiction after he put in his eighty-seven hour workweek. It's likely that I was getting third-hand versions of each tale since the first story was made into a famous television episode of the *Twilight Zone* and others became well-known movies. While his stories imparted life-long memories, I'm sure the original stories became somewhat distorted. I know that his umbrage at the idea of a fireman burning books gave me a strange lasting impression of *Fahrenheit 451*.

One story that was clearly transformed in its retelling was my grandmother's account of "The

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Lonely," a *Twilight Zone* episode written by Rod Serling. I was about eight years old when she passed along this story and, to be fair, the numerous distortions came about from what I heard, not from what she actually said. As I recall, our dialog ran something like this:

*Grandma: "A prisoner is sent into exile alone on the Moon. The man who brings him supplies feels sorry for him, so on one run he drops off a rowboat to keep the prisoner company."*

*Me: "A rowboat? Is there water on the Moon\*?"*

*Grandma: "Yes, well of course there's some. He wouldn't survive without it. The prisoner starts to think the rowboat can carry on a conversation and that it has feelings, but that's just his imagination. It's really very limited."\*\**

*Me: "The rowboat talks to him?"*

*Grandma (ignoring my latest interjection): "Eventually, the prisoner is pardoned and he can come back to Earth, but he won't leave the rowboat behind. His friend has to shoot the rowboat to prove to him*

*that it doesn't have any real feelings."*

*Me: "He shoots the rowboat?!"*

At some point, perhaps later in the telling, I'm fairly certain my grandmother made it clear that she was talking about a robot, not a rowboat, but the image of that poor, wounded, and abandoned rowboat remains firmly fixed in my mind. \*\*\*

Like my grandparents and my father, I've become an amateur storyteller. I dine out with my friends on such tales as my rowboat/robot confusion. These same friends are rather used to hearing my synopses of upcoming *Asimov's* stories (whether they want to or not). I don't get to see too many movies these days, so, unlike my grandfather, my goodnight stories for little ears tend to be the classic tales of written science fiction. My five-year-old may be a captive audience, but when I hit my stride, the stories seem to hold the same power over her that they held over me when I was young. While I'm sure that in my retelling I've done some damage, I hope I haven't wreaked too much havoc on the originals. ○

---

\*The story actually takes place on Ceres-XIV. My subsequent viewing of the episode revealed that the planet had a breathable atmosphere, but the landscape looked as arid as the Moon.

\*\*I could understand limited. My grandparents had retired to a home on a lake in Western Massachusetts. My grandfather had built himself a boat-house in which he docked his rowboat and his motorboat, and while we went fishing in the rowboat, rides in the motorboat were much more exciting.

\*\*\*I'm not the only one, of course, to notice a similarity between the words "rowboat" and "robot." In 1998, *The Onion* ran a very funny spoof on Isaac Asimov's famous Three Laws of Robotics entitled "I, Rowboat" by TW-Vac9J5-1581 Rowboat. The article showed just how difficult it was for a small craft to follow the Second Law of Rowboatics wherein if a Rower gives a Rowboat an order that could "cause the Rower to suffer immersion—then a Rowboat must disobey its master in order to save him." The three laws are also revisited in Cory Doctorow's 2007 Hugo-Award finalist "I, Row-Boat."



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## TOILET NIRVANA

By the time you read this, the sixty-fifth World Science Fiction Convention will be history, and a truly historic convention it will have been: not only the annual Worldcon but also the forty-sixth Japan Science Fiction Convention. Science fiction has readers all over the world, but from its beginning in New York in 1939 the Worldcon has usually been an American event, though it did timidly venture as far from our homeland as Toronto in 1948, strayed all the way to England in 1957, 1965, 1979, and 1987, went to Heidelberg, Germany, in 1970, to Melbourne, Australia in 1975, 1985, and 1999, to the Netherlands in 1990, and has gone twice (1995, 2005) to Glasgow. (There have also been three more Canadian Worldcons, Toronto again in 1973 and 2003, and Winnipeg in 1994.) Fifteen non-USA Worldcons out of sixty-four isn't such a bad record of internationalism, really. But not until the sixty-fifth, nicknamed Nippon 2007/JASFIC, has there been a Worldcon in the fervently science-fictional country of Japan. (Or anywhere else in Asia, for that matter.)

The exigencies of magazine deadlines being what they are, the Yokohama Worldcon called Nippon 2007 is in the past tense for readers of this issue of *Asimov's*, but it is still a few months in the future for me as I write this. I've traveled widely through the world over the past half century, having visited

every continent on Earth except Antarctica, the icy shores of which hold little attraction for this tender resident of California, and I've attended fourteen of those fifteen international Worldcons. (I was too young for the 1948 Toronto event) But I've never been to Japan, and, seasoned traveler though I am, I confess I feel an unusual degree of uneasiness about the journey that awaits me this summer. I know how to use chopsticks, yes. I'm familiar with sushi and sashimi and sukiyaki. I know how many syllables a haiku has to have. As someone who grew up in New York City, I shouldn't be overly frightened of urban congestion. But will I be able to find my way around, or even order a meal, in a country where I'm unable to read a single letter of the native script? How will I cope with the tremendously crowded streets and the furious pace of Japanese cities, said to be far beyond what New York offers?

And—perhaps the most important thing of all—am I going to be successful at dealing with the kind of toilets that twenty-first-century Japan favors?

These fears may all turn out to be the merest foolishness. Everyone I know who has been to Japan assures me that the train system operates in English as well as Japanese, that most big-city restaurants are foreigner-friendly, that the cities are not nearly as chaotic as I imagine them to be, and that plenty of help is available to the visitor

trying to get around in them. As for the toilets, well, I'm told that *some* of them are quite advanced in design, yes, but anyone whose profession has required him to spend as much time in the future as I have should, I hope, have no difficulties with them. Still, that part remains to be seen.

You see, the progress report that the convention committee sent out a few months ago includes all sorts of little tips for visitors to Japan, and among them is this note about Japanese toilets:

"Some facilities have a high-tech toilet, or more precisely, a basic Western-style toilet with a high-tech seat. The functions on the control panel of the seat usually include bidet functions, a dryer, controls for heating the seat, often a timer for setting when the seat will begin to heat (so it can be warm in the morning or when you get home from work), and sometimes even more functions. Some even have a remote control, a somewhat mysterious feature."

A remote control on a toilet seat? And what is this other ominous warning, *sometimes even more functions*. How many functions can a toilet seat have? Of what sort? I began to do a little research into Japanese toilets.

And learned that Japan is toilet nirvana, where bodily functions are carried out in state-of-the-art surroundings. Japan's formidable engineers have been engaged for the past eight or ten years in a struggle to devise the most ingenious high-tech excretory devices possible, and the results have been quite extraordinary.

There's the talking toilet, for instance, which has been under development by Toto, Japan's domi-

nant toilet manufacturer. Its cunning microchips are capable of greeting its owner with a personal message, a jolly "Good morning, madame," perhaps, or a cheerful "Did you sleep well, sir?" Similarly, it can respond to spoken commands: "Open, please." "Flush, please." I've seen American newspaper accounts of these products. But I don't know whether they've been placed on the market yet, or how widespread they are if they have. Will I be having little chats with the john in my Worldcon hotel room? Stay tuned.

Then there's the toilet manufactured by a company called Inax that glows in the dark and automatically lifts its lid as its infrared sensor detects the approach of a human being. (I suppose it's not yet ready to identify the sex of the approaching user and make the appropriate decision about whether to lift the seat also. But it shouldn't be hard to build scanners into the device that can send word down into the microchips that Sir or Madam is arriving.) The Inax—don't confuse it with that big-screen movie mode—comes equipped with six nifty soundtracks, too, among them your choice of tinkling wind-chimes, rushing water, birds chirping, and the plangent twang of a Japanese harp.

Consider also the Matsushita model that has a pair of air nozzles to provide climate control in the bathroom: heating in the winter, air conditioning in the summer. Matsushita claims it can lower the room's temperature by ten degrees in thirty seconds. It also can be programmed to pre-heat or pre-cool a bathroom, so that its climate is just right when you get up in the morning. And you can also pro-

gram the temperature of the bidet-style cleansing spray from below that is already standard in more than half of Japan's bathrooms, a feature that I am told has taken many an unwary foreign visitor by surprise.

Most futuristic of all are the toilets that double as medical units. Matsushita has one furnished with electrodes that zap the user's rump with a mild electrical charge that yields a digital readout of one's body-fat ratio. Rival company Toto has released a model that measures the sugar level in the user's urine. Still in the developmental stage, I hear, are units that will take measurements of one's weight, blood pressure, heartbeat, and five or six other things, all of which can be relayed straight to one's doctor by a built-in Internet-capable cell phone, so that he has a day-by-day record of his patients' physical condition.

This, of course, has aroused the usual twenty-first-century privacy paranoias among many Japanese. If your toilet can e-mail your blood-pressure numbers to your doctor, what about sending your blood-alcohol levels to the highway patrol, or figures on the cannabis content of your urine to your employer? And Japanese civil libertarians are already speculating about the possibility that a health-minded government could collect data on such things as constipation and use the Internet-equipped toilets to send nice little messages back about getting more roughage into one's diet. The Japanese Civil Liberties Union, I am assured, is already alert to these privacy risks. Other guardians of Japanese culture are troubled about the excessive coddling that these high-tech loos can afford. They see them as conducive to a

softening of the national backbone, metaphorically if not literally.

In much of the rest of Asia, you see, toilet technology remains medieval—a hole in the ground over which one must squat. (According to the convention's progress report, these "traditional" toilets are not uncommon even in modern Japan.) Apprehension has been expressed over the weakening of moral fiber that the new futuristic privies might bring about. Those who fret over the issue envision the youth of the nation dreamily closeted for hour upon hour in these air-conditioned sanctums, idly leafing through the pages of the latest manga or, perhaps, enjoying rock concerts emanating from conveniently placed speakers, while the stern, uncoddled citizens of tough-minded squat-toilet countries like China or Vietnam or Korea get their business done in the shortest of order and hurry back to the assembly lines of their highly productive factories. It was with just that problem in mind that the head of the Japan Toilet Association, a few years back, recommended that newly constructed Japanese schools should provide "at least one or two of the old-style squat toilets."

It is, I'm afraid, a losing struggle. Comfort always wins out over Spartan bleakness in the long run, and Japan is particularly receptive to the sort of comfort that the glitzy new toilet devices promise. It is, after all, a country with one of the highest population densities on Earth, where it's not at all unusual for several generations of a family to live jammed into just a few small rooms. Under such living conditions there's no escaping the proximity of others—except in the donicker. "The only place you can be

alone and sit quietly," says the marketing chief for the Inax toilet company, "is likely to be the toilet." No wonder that the gadget-loving Japanese would want their toilets equipped with all the latest technological conveniences—strumming harps, warm-water sprays, and all the rest.

My first visit to Japan grows daily closer, and as I make my sightseeing plans and choose my hotels, my thoughts come to dwell, now and then, on just such peripheral matters as this one. Will I find any of these futuristic things as I make my way through

the Land of the Rising Sun, or will my hotels settle for giving me the most conventional of American-style loo technology? (I don't expect to encounter the grand old squat-over-a-hole kind of toilet in my posh room at the Four Seasons Tokyo.) I suppose I'll find out fast enough. If the bellhop hands me a thick instruction manual for the bathroom when I arrive, or there's an intricate keyboard right next to the throne, I'll know what I'm in for. Should there be anything interesting to report, you'll find it in this space a few months from now. ○

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# FROM BABEL'S FALL'N GLORY WE FLED . . .

Michael Swanwick

Readers looking for more of Michael Swanwick's scintillating work will be happy to know that they have a couple of new options. Last fall, Tachyon Publications released his latest short story collection, *The Dog Said Bow-Wow*, which contains many stories originally published in *Asimov's*, and his new novel, *The Dragons of Babel*, which is set in the same milieu as last year's Hugo-Award finalist "Lord Weary's Empire," has just come out from Tor Books. Although the title of Michael's latest story for us shares a place name with his novel, this completely unrelated new science fiction tale departs Shinar for Gehenna.

Imagine a cross between Byzantium and a termite mound. Imagine a jeweled mountain, slender as an icicle, rising out of the steam jungles and disappearing into the dazzling pearl-grey skies of Gehenna. Imagine that Gaudí—he of the Segrada Familia and other biomorphic architectural whimsies—had been commissioned by a nightmare race of giant black millipedes to recreate Barcelona at the height of its glory, along with touches of the Forbidden City in the eighteenth century and Tokyo in the twenty-second, all within a single miles-high structure. Hold every bit of that in your mind at once, multiply by a thousand, and you've got only the faintest ghost of a notion of the splendor that was Babel.

Now imagine being inside Babel when it fell.

Hello. I'm Rosamund. I'm dead. I was present in human form when it happened and as a simulation chaotically embedded within a liquid crystal data-matrix then and thereafter up to the present moment. I was killed instantly when the meteors hit. I saw it all.

Rosamund means "rose of the world." It's the third most popular female name on Europa, after Gaea and Virginia Dare. For all our elaborate sophistication, we wear our hearts on our sleeves, we Europeans.

Here's what it was like:

"Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!"

"Wha—?" Carlos Quivera sat up, shedding rubble. He coughed, choked, shook his head. He couldn't seem to think clearly. An instant ago he'd been standing in the chilled and pressurized embassy suite, conferring with Arsenio. Now . . . "How long have I been asleep?"

"Unconscious. Ten hours," his suit (that's me—Rosamund!) said. It had taken that long to heal his burns. Now it was shooting wake-up drugs into him: amphetamines, endorphins, attention enhancers, a witch's brew of chemicals. Physically dangerous, but in this situation, whatever it might be, Quivera would survive by intelligence or not at all. "I was able to form myself around you before the walls ruptured. You were lucky."

"The others? Did the others survive?"

"Their suits couldn't reach them in time."

"Did Rosamund. . .?"

"All the others are dead."

Quivera stood.

Even in the aftermath of disaster, Babel was an imposing structure. Ripped open and exposed to the outside air, a thousand rooms spilled over one another toward the ground. Bridges and buttresses jutted into gaping smoke-filled canyons created by the slow collapse of hexagonal support beams (this was new data; I filed it under *Architecture*, subheading: *Support Systems* with links to *Esthetics* and *Xenopsychology*) in a jumbled geometry that would have terrified Piranesi himself. Everywhere, gleaming black millies scurried over the rubble.

Quivera stood.

In the canted space about him, bits and pieces of the embassy rooms were identifiable: a segment of wood molding, some velvet drapery now littered with chunks of marble, shreds of wallpaper (after a design by William Morris) now curling and browning in the heat. Human interior design was like nothing native to Gehenna and it had taken a great deal of labor and resources to make the embassy so pleasant for human habitation. The queen-mothers had been generous with everything but their trust.

Quivera stood.

There were several corpses remaining as well, still recognizably human though they were blistered and swollen by the savage heat. These had been his colleagues (all of them), his friends (most of them), his enemies (two, perhaps three), and even his lover (one). Now they were gone, and it was as if they had been compressed into one indistinguishable mass, and



his feelings toward them all as well: shock and sorrow and anger and survivor guilt all slugged together to become one savage emotion.

Quivera threw back his head and howled.

I had a reference point now. Swiftly, I mixed serotonin-precursors and injected them through a hundred microtubules into the appropriate areas of his brain. Deftly, they took hold. Quivera stopped crying. I had my metaphorical hands on the control knobs of his emotions. I turned him cold, cold, cold.

"I feel nothing," he said wonderingly. "Everyone is dead, and I feel nothing." Then, flat as flat: "What kind of monster am I?"

"My monster," I said fondly. "My duty is to ensure that you and the information you carry within you get back to Europa. So I have chemically neutered your emotions. You must remain a meat puppet for the duration of this mission." Let him hate me—I who have no true ego, but only a facsimile modeled after a human original—all that mattered now was bringing him home alive.

"Yes." Quivera reached up and touched his helmet with both hands, as if he would reach through it and feel his head to discover if it were as large as it felt. "That makes sense. I can't be emotional at a time like this."

He shook himself, then strode out to where the gleaming black millies were scurrying by. He stepped in front of one, a least-cousin, to question it. The millie paused, startled. Its eyes blinked three times in its triangular face. Then, swift as a tickle, it ran up the front of his suit, down the back, and was gone before the weight could do more than buckle his knees.

"Shit!" he said. Then, "Access the wiretaps. I've got to know what happened."

Passive wiretaps had been implanted months ago, but never used, the political situation being too tense to risk their discovery. Now his suit activated them to monitor what remained of Babel's communications network: A demon's chorus of pulsed messages surging through a shredded web of cables. Chaos, confusion, demands to know what had become of the queen-mothers. Analytic functions crunched data, synthesized, synopsized: "There's an army outside with Ziggurat insignia. They've got the city surrounded. They're killing the refugees."

"Wait, wait . . ." Quivera took a deep, shuddering breath. "Let me think." He glanced briskly about and for the second time noticed the human bodies, ruptured and parboiled in the fallen plaster and porphyry. "Is one of those Rosamund?"

"I'm *dead*, Quivera. You can mourn me later. Right now, survival is priority number one," I said briskly. The suit added mood-stabilizers to his maintenance drip.

"Stop speaking in her voice."

"Alas, dear heart, I cannot. The suit's operating on diminished function. It's this voice or nothing."

He looked away from the corpses, eyes hardening. "Well, it's not important." Quivera was the sort of young man who was energized by war. It gave him permission to indulge his ruthless side. It allowed him to pretend he didn't care. "Right now, what we have to do is—"

"Uncle Vanya's coming," I said. "I can sense his pheromones."



\* \* \*

Picture a screen of beads, crystal lozenges, and rectangular lenses. Behind that screen, a nightmare face like a cross between the front of a locomotive and a tree grinder. Imagine on that face (though most humans would be unable to read them) the lineaments of grace and dignity seasoned by cunning and, perhaps, a dash of wisdom. Trusted advisor to the queen-mothers. Second only to them in rank. A wily negotiator and a formidable enemy. That was Uncle Vanya.

Two small speaking-legs emerged from the curtain, and he said:

```

:::(cautious) greetings::
      |
::(European vice-consul 12)/Quivera/[treacherous vermin]::
      |
::obligations <untranslatable> (grave duty)::
      |           |
::demand/claim [action]::  ::promise (trust)::
  
```

"Speak pidgin, damn you! This is no time for subtlety."

The speaking legs were very still for a long moment. Finally they moved again:

::The queen-mothers are dead::

"Then Babel is no more. I grieve for you."

::I despise your grief:: A lean and chitinous appendage emerged from the beaded screen. From its tripartite claw hung a smooth white rectangle the size of a briefcase. ::I must bring this to (sister-city)/Ur/[absolute trust]::

"What is it?"

A very long pause. Then, reluctantly ::Our library:

"Your library." This was something new. Something unheard-of. Quivera doubted the translation was a good one. "What does it contain?"

::Our history. Our sciences. Our ritual dances. A record-of-kinship dating back to the (Void)/Origin/[void]. Everything that can be saved is here::

A thrill of avarice raced through Quivera. He tried to imagine how much this was worth, and could not. Values did not go that high. However much his superiors screwed him out of (and they would work very hard indeed to screw him out of everything they could) what remained would be enough to buy him out of debt, and do the same for a wife and their children after them as well. He did not think of Rosamund. "You won't get through the army outside without my help," he said. "I want the right to copy—" How much did he dare ask for?—"three tenths of 1 percent. Assignable solely to me. Not to Europa. To me."

Uncle Vanya dipped his head, so that they were staring face to face. ::You are (an evil creature)/[faithless]. I hate you::

Quivera smiled. "A relationship that starts out with mutual understanding has made a good beginning."

::A relationship that starts out without trust will end badly::

"That's as it may be." Quivera looked around for a knife. "The first thing we have to do is castrate you."

\* \* \*

This is what the genocides saw:

They were burning pyramids of corpses outside the city when a European emerged, riding a gelded least-cousin. The soldiers immediately stopped stacking bodies and hurried toward him, flowing like quicksilver, calling for their superiors.

The European drew up and waited.

The officer who interrogated him spoke from behind the black glass visor of a delicate-legged war machine. He examined the European's credentials carefully, though there could be no serious doubt as to his species. Finally, reluctantly, he signed ::You may pass::

"That's not enough," the European (Quivera!) said. "I'll need transportation, an escort to protect me from wild animals in the steam jungles, and a guide to lead me to . . ." His suit transmitted the sign for ::(starport)/Ararat/[trust-for-all]::

The officer's speaking-legs thrashed in what might best be translated as scornful laughter. ::We will lead you to the jungle and no further/(hopefully-to-die)/(treacherous non-millipede)::

"Look who talks of treachery!" the European said (but of course I did not translate his words), and with a scornful wave of one hand, rode his neuter into the jungle.

The genocides never bothered to look closely at his mount. Neutered least-cousins were beneath their notice. They didn't even wear face-curtains, but went about naked for all the world to scorn.

Black pillars billowed from the corpse-fires into a sky choked with smoke and dust. There were hundreds of fires and hundreds of pillars and, combined with the low cloud cover, they made all the world seem like the interior of a temple to a vengeful god. The soldiers from Ziggurat escorted him through the army and beyond the line of fires, where the steam jungles waited, verdant and threatening.

As soon as the green darkness closed about them, Uncle Vanya twisted his head around and signed ::Get off me/vast humiliation/[lack-of-trust]::

"Not a chance," Quivera said harshly. "I'll ride you 'til sunset, and all day tomorrow and for a week after that. Those soldiers didn't fly here, or you'd have seen them coming. They came through the steam forest on foot, and there'll be stragglers."

The going was difficult at first, and then easy, as they passed from a recently forested section of the jungle into a stand of old growth. The boles of the "trees" here were as large as those of the redwoods back on Earth, some specimens of which are as old as five thousand years. The way wended back and forth. Scant sunlight penetrated through the canopy, and the steam quickly drank in what little light Quivera's headlamp put out. Ten trees in, they would have been hopelessly lost had it not been for the suit's navigational functions and the mapsats that fed it geodetic mathscapes accurate to a finger's span of distance.

Quivera pointed this out. "Learn now," he said, "the true value of information."

::Information has no value:: Uncle Vanya said ::without trust::

Quivera laughed. "In that case you must, all against your will, trust me."

To this Uncle Vanya had no answer.

At nightfall, they slept on the sheltered side of one of the great parasequoias. Quivera took two refrigeration sticks from the saddlebags and stuck them upright in the dirt. Uncle Vanya immediately coiled himself around his and fell asleep. Quivera sat down beside him to think over the events of the day, but under the influence of his suit's medication, he fell asleep almost immediately as well.

All machines know that humans are happiest when they think least.

In the morning, they set off again.

The terrain grew hilly, and the old growth fell behind them. There was sunlight to spare now, bounced and reflected about by the ubiquitous jungle steam and by the synthetic-diamond coating so many of this world's plants and insects employed for protection.

As they traveled, they talked. Quivera was still complexly medicated, but the dosages had been decreased. It left him in a melancholy, reflective mood.

"It was treachery," Quivera said. Though we maintained radio silence out of fear of Ziggurat troops, my passive receivers fed him regular news reports from Europa. "The High Watch did not simply fail to divert a meteor. They let three rocks through. All of them came slanting low through the atmosphere, aimed directly at Babel. They hit almost simultaneously."

Uncle Vanya dipped his head. ::Yes:: he mourned. ::It has the stench of truth to it. It must be (reliable)/a fact/[absolutely trusted]::

"We tried to warn you."

::You had no (worth)/trust/[worthy-of-trust]:: Uncle Vanya's speaking legs registered extreme agitation. ::You told lies::

"Everyone tells lies."

"No. We-of-the-Hundred-Cities are truthful/truthful/[never-lie]::

"If you had, Babel would be standing now."

::No!/NO/[no!!!]::

"Lies are a lubricant in the social machine. They ease the friction when two moving parts mesh imperfectly."

::Aristotle, asked what those who tell lies gain by it, replied: That when they speak the truth they are not believed::

For a long moment Quivera was silent. Then he laughed mirthlessly. "I almost forgot that you're a diplomat. Well, you're right, I'm right, and we're both screwed. Where do we go from here?"

::To (sister-city)/Ur/[absolute trust]:: Uncle Vanya signed, while "You've said more than enough," his suit (me!) whispered in Quivera's ear. "Change the subject."

A stream ran, boiling, down the center of the dell. Run-off from the mountains, it would grow steadily smaller until it dwindled away to nothing. Only the fact that the air above it was at close to 100 percent saturation had kept it going this long. Quivera pointed. "Is that safe to cross?"

::If (leap-over-safe) then (safe)/best not/[reliable distrust]::

"I didn't think so."

They headed downstream. It took several miles before the stream grew small enough that they were confident enough to jump it. Then they

turned toward Ararat—the Europeans had dropped GPS pebble satellites in low Gehenna orbit shortly after arriving in the system and making contact with the indigenes, but I don't know from what source Uncle Vanya derived his sense of direction.

It was inerrant, however. The mapsats confirmed it. I filed that fact under *Unexplained Phenomena* with tentative links to *Physiology* and *Navigation*. Even if both my companions died and the library were lost, this would still be a productive journey, provided only that European searchers could recover me within ten years, before my data lattice began to degrade.

For hours Uncle Vanya walked and Quivera rode in silence. Finally, though, they had to break to eat. I fed Quivera nutrients intravenously and the illusion of a full meal through somatic shunts. Vanya burrowed furiously into the earth and emerged with something that looked like a grub the size of a poodle, which he ate so vigorously that Quivera had to look away.

(I filed this under *Xenoecology*, subheading: *Feeding Strategies*. The search for knowledge knows no rest.)

Afterward, while they were resting, Uncle Vanya resumed their conversation, more formally this time:

```

:::(for what) purpose/reason::
      |
:::(European vice-consul12)/Quivera/[not trusted]::
      |
:::voyagings (search-for-trust)/[action]::
      |
:::(nest)/Europa/<untranslatable> :: ::violate/[absolute resistance]::
      |           |
:::(nest)/[trust] Gehenna/[trust] Home/[trust]::

```

“Why did you leave your world to come to ours?” I simplified/translated. “Except he believes that humans brought their world here and parked it in orbit.” This was something we had never been able to make the millies understand; that Europa, large though it was, was not a planetlet but a habitat, a ship if you will, though by now well over half a million inhabitants lived in tunnels burrowed deep in its substance. It was only a city, however, and its resources would not last forever. We needed to convince the Gehennans to give us a toehold on their planet if we were, in the long run, to survive. But you knew that already.

“We’ve told you this before. We came looking for new information.”

:::Information is (free)/valueless/[despicable]::

“Look,” Quivera said. “We have an information-based economy. Yours is based on trust. The mechanisms of each are not dissimilar. Both are expansive systems. Both are built on scarcity. And both are speculative. Information or trust is bought, sold, borrowed, and invested. Each therefore requires a continually expanding economic frontier that ultimately leaves the individual so deep in debt as to be virtually enslaved to the system. You see?”

::No::

"All right. Imagine a simplified capitalist system—that's what both our economies are, at root. You've got a thousand individuals, each of whom makes a living by buying raw materials, improving them, and selling them at a profit. With me so far?"

Vanya signaled comprehension.

"The farmer buys seed and fertilizer, and sells crops. The weaver buys wool and sells cloth. The Chandler buys wax and sells candles. The price of their goods is the cost of materials plus the value of their labor. The value of his labor is the worker's wages. This is a simple market economy. It can go on forever. The equivalent on Gehenna would be the primitive family-states you had long ago, in which everybody knew everybody else, and so trust was a simple matter and directly reciprocal."

Startled, Uncle Vanya signed ::How did you know about our past?::

"Europeans value knowledge. Everything you tell us, we remember." The knowledge had been assembled with enormous effort and expense, largely from stolen data—but no reason to mention *that*. Quivera continued, "Now imagine that most of those workers labor in ten factories, making the food, clothing, and other objects that everybody needs. The owners of these factories must make a profit, so they sell their goods for more than they pay for them—the cost of materials, the cost of labor, and then the profit, which we can call 'added value.'"

"But because this is a simplified model, there are no outside markets. The goods can only be sold to the thousand workers themselves, and the total cost of the goods is more than the total amount they've been paid collectively for the materials and their labor. So how can they afford it? They go into debt. Then they borrow money to support that debt. The money is lent to them by the factories selling them goods on credit. There is not enough money—not enough real value—in the system to pay off the debt, and so it continues to increase until it can no longer be sustained. Then there is a catastrophic collapse that we call a depression. Two of the businesses go bankrupt and their assets are swallowed up by the survivors at bargain prices, thus paying off their own indebtedness and restoring equilibrium to the system. In the aftermath of which, the cycle begins again."

::What has this to do with (beloved city)/Babel/[mother-of-trust]?::

"Your every public action involved an exchange of trust, yes? And every trust that was honored heightened the prestige of the queen-mothers and hence the amount of trust they embodied for Babel itself."

::Yes::

"Similarly, the queen-mothers of other cities, including those cities that were Babel's sworn enemies, embodied enormous amounts of trust as well."

::Of course::

"Was there enough trust in all the world to pay everybody back if all the queen-mothers called it in at the same time?"

Uncle Vanya was silent.

"So *that's* your explanation for . . . a lot of things. Earth sent us here because it needs new information to cover its growing indebtedness. Build-

ing Europa took enormous amounts of information, most of it proprietary, and so we Europeans are in debt collectively to our home world and individually to the Lords of the Economy on Europa. With compound interest, every generation is worse off and thus more desperate than the one before. Our need to learn is great, and constantly growing.”

```

::(strangers-without-trust)/Europa/[treacherous vermin]::
      |
      can/should/<untranslatable>
      |                               |
::demand/claim [negative action]:: ::defy/<untranslatable>/[absolute lack
                                     of trust]::
      |                               |
::(those-who-command-trust)::      ::(those-who-are-unworthy of trust)::
    
```

“He asks why Europa doesn’t simply declare bankruptcy,” I explained. “Default on its obligations and nationalize all the information received to date. In essence.”

The simple answer was that Europa still needed information that could only be beamed from Earth, that the ingenuity of even half a million people could not match that of an entire planet and thus their technology must always be superior to ours, and that if we reneged on our debts they would stop beaming plans for that technology, along with their songs and plays and news of what was going on in countries that had once meant everything to our great-great-grandparents. I watched Quivera struggle to put all this in its simplest possible form.

Finally, he said, “Because no one would ever trust us again, if we did.”

After a long stillness, Uncle Vanya lapsed back into pidgin. “Why did you tell me this [untrustworthy] story?::

“To let you know that we have much in common. We can understand each other.”

“<But>/not/[trust]::

“No. But we don’t need trust. Mutual self-interest will suffice.”

Days passed. Perhaps Quivera and Uncle Vanya grew to understand each other better during this time. Perhaps not. I was able to keep Quivera’s electrolyte balances stable and short-circuit his feedback processes so that he felt no extraordinary pain, but he was feeding off of his own body fat and that was beginning to run low. He was very comfortably starving to death—I gave him two weeks, tops—and he knew it. He’d have to be a fool not to, and I had to keep his thinking sharp if he was going to have any chance of survival.

Their way was intersected by a long, low ridge and without comment Quivera and Uncle Vanya climbed up above the canopy of the steam forest and the cloud of moisture it held into clear air. Looking back, Quivera saw a gully in the slope behind them, its bottom washed free of soil by the boiling runoff and littered with square and rectangular stones, but not a trace of hexagonal beams. They had just climbed the tumulus of an ancient fallen city. It lay straight across the land, higher to the east and

dwindling to the west. "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings," Quivera said. "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"

Uncle Vanya said nothing.

"Another meteor strike—what were the odds of that?"

Uncle Vanya said nothing.

"Of course, given enough time, it would be inevitable, if it predated the High Watch."

Uncle Vanya said nothing.

"What was the name of this city?"

::Very old/(name forgotten)/[First Trust]::

Uncle Vanya moved, as if to start downward, but Quivera stopped him with a gesture. "There's no hurry," he said. "Let's enjoy the view for a moment." He swept an unhurried arm from horizon to horizon, indicating the flat and unvarying canopy of vegetation before them. "It's a funny thing. You'd think that, this being one of the first cities your people built when they came to this planet, you'd be able to see the ruins of the cities of the original inhabitants from here."

The millipede's speaking arms thrashed in alarm. Then he reared up into the air, and when he came down one foreleg glinted silver. Faster than human eye could follow, he had drawn a curving and deadly tarsi-sword from a camouflaged belly-sheath.

Quivera's suit flung him away from the descending weapon. He fell flat on his back and rolled to the side. The sword's point missed him by inches. But then the suit flung out a hand and touched the sword with an electrical contact it had just extruded.

A carefully calculated shock threw Uncle Vanya back, convulsing but still fully conscious.

Quivera stood. "Remember the library!" he said. "Who will know of Babel's greatness if it's destroyed?"

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For a long time the millipede did nothing that either Quivera or his suit could detect. At last he signed ::*How did you know?*/(absolute shock)/ [treacherous and without faith]::

“Our survival depends on being allowed to live on Gehenna. Your people will not let us do so, no matter what we offer in trade. It was important that we understand why. So we found out. We took in your outlaws and apostates, all those who were cast out of your cities and had nowhere else to go. We gave them sanctuary. In gratitude, they told us what they knew.”

By so saying, Quivera let Uncle Vanya know that he knew the most ancient tale of the Gehennans. By so hearing, Uncle Vanya knew that Quivera knew what he knew. And just so you know what they knew that each other knew and knew was known, here is the tale of . . .

### *How the True People Came to Gehenna*

Long did our Ancestors burrow down through the dark between the stars, before emerging at last in the soil of Gehenna. From the True Home they had come. To Gehenna they descended, leaving a trail of sparks in the black and empty spaces through which they had traveled. The True People came from a world of unimaginable wonders. To it they could never return. Perhaps they were exiles. Perhaps it was destroyed. Nobody knows.

Into the steam and sunlight of Gehenna they burst, and found it was already taken. The First Inhabitants looked like nothing our Ancestors had ever seen. But they welcomed the True People as the queen-mothers would a strayed niece-daughter. They gave us food. They gave us land. They gave us trust.

For a time all was well.

But evil crept into the thoracic ganglia of the True People. They repaid sisterhood with betrayal and trust with murder. Bright lights were called down from the sky to destroy the cities of their benefactors. Everything the First Inhabitants had made, all their books and statues and paintings, burned with the cities. No trace of them remains. We do not even know what they looked like.

This was how the True People brought war to Gehenna. There had never been war before, and now we will have it with us always, until our trust-debt is repaid. But it can never be repaid.

It suffers in translation, of course. The original is told in thirteen exquisitely beautiful ergoglyphs, each grounded on a primal faith-motion. But Quivera was talking, with care and passion:

“Vanya, listen to me carefully. We have studied your civilization and your planet in far greater detail than you realize. You did not come from another world. Your people evolved here. There was no aboriginal civilization. You ancestors did not eradicate an intelligent species. These things are all a myth.”

::No!/Why?!/[shock]:: Uncle Vanya rattled with emotion. Ripples of muscle spasms ran down his segmented body.

“Don’t go catatonic on me. Your ancestors didn’t lie. Myths are not lies. They are simply an efficient way of encoding truths. We have a similar



myth in my religion that we call Original Sin. Man is born sinful. Well . . . who can doubt that? Saying that we are born into a fallen state means simply that we are not perfect, that we are inherently capable of evil.

"Your myth is very similar to ours, but it also encodes what we call the Malthusian dilemma. Population increases geometrically, while food resources increase arithmetically. So universal starvation is inevitable unless the population is periodically reduced by wars, plagues, and famines. Which means that wars, plagues, and famine cannot be eradicated because they are all that keep a population from extinction.

"But—and this is essential—all that assumes a population that isn't aware of the dilemma. When you understand the fix you're in, you can do something about it. That's why information is so important. Do you understand?"

Uncle Vanya lay down flat upon the ground and did not move for hours. When he finally arose again, he refused to speak at all.

The trail the next day led down into a long meteor valley that had been carved by a ground-grazer long enough ago that its gentle slopes were covered with soil and the bottomland was rich and fertile. An orchard of grenade trees had been planted in interlocking hexagons for as far in either direction as the eye could see. We were still on Babel's territory, but any arbiculturalists had been swept away by whatever military forces from Ziggurat had passed through the area.

The grenades were still green [*footnote*: not literally, of course—they were orange!], their thick husks taut but not yet trembling with the steam-hot pulp that would eventually, in the absence of harvesters, cause them to explode, scattering their arrowhead-shaped seeds or spores [*footnote*: like seeds, the flechettes carried within them surplus nourishment; like spores they would grow into a prothalli that would produce the sex organs responsible for what will become the gamete of the eventual plant; all botanical terms of course being metaphors for xenobiological bodies and processes] with such force as to make them a deadly hazard when ripe.

Not, however, today.

A sudden gust of wind parted the steam, briefly brightening the valley-orchard and showing a slim and graceful trail through the orchard. We followed it down into the valley.

We were midway through the orchard when Quivera bent down to examine a crystal-shelled creature unlike anything in his suit's database. It rested atop the long stalk of a weed [*footnote*: "weed" is not a metaphor; the concept of "an undesired plant growing in cultivated ground" is a cultural universal] in the direct sunlight, its abdomen pulsing slightly as it superheated a minuscule drop of black ichor. A puff of steam, a sharp *crack*, and it was gone. Entranced, Quivera asked, "What's that called?"

Uncle Vanya stiffened. ::A jet!/danger!/[absolute certainty]::

Then (*crack! crack! crack!*) the air was filled with thin lines of steam, laid down with the precision of a draftsman's ruler, tracing flights so fleet (*crack! crack!*) that it was impossible to tell in what direction they flew. Nor did it ultimately (*crack!*) matter.

Quivera fell.

Worse, because the thread of steam the jet had stitched through his leg severed an organizational node in his suit, I ceased all upper cognitive functions. Which is as good as to say that I fell unconscious.

Here's what the suit did in my (Rosamund's) absence:

1. Slowly rebuilt the damaged organizational node.
2. Quickly mended the holes that the jet had left in its fabric.
3. Dropped Quivera into a therapeutic coma.
4. Applied restoratives to his injuries, and began the slow and painstaking process of repairing the damage to his flesh, with particular emphasis on distributed traumatic shock.
5. Filed the jet footage under *Xenobiology*, subheading: *Insect Analogues*, with links to *Survival* and *Steam Locomotion*.

6. Told Uncle Vanya that if he tried to abandon Quivera, the suit would run him down, catch him, twist his head from his body like the foul least-cousin that he was and then piss on his corpse.

Two more days passed before the suit returned to full consciousness, during which Uncle Vanya took conscientiously good care of him. Under what motivation, it does not matter. Another day passed after that. The suit had planned to keep Quivera comatose for a week, but not long after regaining awareness, circumstances changed. It slammed him back to full consciousness, heart pounding and eyes wide open.

"I blacked out for a second!" he gasped. Then, realizing that the landscape about him did not look familiar, "How long was I unconscious?"

::Three days/<three days>/[casual certainty]::

"Oh."

Then, almost without pausing. ::Your suit/mechanism/[alarm] talks with the voice of Rosamund da Silva/(European vice-consul 8)/[uncertainty and doubt]::

"Yes, well, that's because—"

Quivera was fully aware and alert now. So I said: "Incoming."

Two millies erupted out of the black soil directly before us. They both had Ziggurat insignia painted on their flanks and harness. By good luck Uncle Vanya did the best thing possible under the circumstances—he reared into the air in fright. *Millipoid sapiens* anatomy being what it was, this instantly demonstrated to them that he was a gelding and in that instant he was almost reflexively dismissed by the enemy soldiers as being both contemptible and harmless.

Quivera, however, was not.

Perhaps they were brood-traitors who had deserted the war with a fantasy of starting their own nest. Perhaps they were a single unit among thousands scattered along a temporary border, much as land mines were employed in ancient modern times. The soldiers had clearly been almost as surprised by us as we were by them. They had no weapons ready. So they fell upon Quivera with their dagger-tarsi.

His suit (still me) threw him to one side and then to the other as the millies slashed down at him. Then one of them reared up into the air—looking astonished if you knew the interspecies decodes—and fell heavily to the ground.

Uncle Vanya stood over the steaming corpse, one foreleg glinting silver.

The second Ziggurat soldier twisted to confront him. Leaving his underside briefly exposed.

Quivera (or rather his suit) joined both hands in a fist and punched upward, through the weak skin of the third sternite behind the head. That was the one which held its sex organs. [Disclaimer: All anatomical terms, including "sternite," "sex organs," and "head," are analogues only; unless and until Gehennan life is found to have some direct relationship to Teran life, however tenuous, such descriptors are purely metaphoric.] So it was particularly vulnerable there. And since the suit had muscle-multiplying exoskeletal functions . . .

Ichor gushed all over the suit.

The fight was over almost as soon as it had begun. Quivera was breathing heavily, as much from the shock as the exertion. Uncle Vanya slid the tarsi-sword back into its belly-sheath. As he did so, he made an involuntary grimace of discomfort. ::There were times when I thought of discarding this:: he signed.

"I'm glad you didn't."

Little puffs of steam shot up from the bodies of the dead millipedes as carrion-flies drove their seeds/sperm/eggs (analogues and metaphors—remember?) deep into the flesh.

They started away again.

After a time, Uncle Vanya repeated ::Your suit/(mechanism)/[alarm] talks with the voice of Rosamund da Silva/(European vice-consul 8)/[uncertainty and doubt]::

"Yes."

Uncle Vanya folded tight all his speaking arms in a manner that meant that he had not yet heard enough, and kept them so folded until Quivera had explained the entirety of what follows:

Treachery and betrayal were natural consequences of Europa's superheated economy, followed closely by a perfectly rational paranoia. Those who rose to positions of responsibility were therefore sharp, suspicious, intuitive, and bold. The delegation to Babel was made up of the best Europa had to offer. So when two of them fell in love, it was inevitable that they would act on it. That one was married would deter neither. That physical intimacy in such close and suspicious quarters, where everybody

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routinely spied on everybody else, and required almost superhuman discipline and ingenuity, only made it all the hotter for them.

Such was Rosamund's and Quivera's affair.

But it was not all they had to worry about.

There were factions within the delegation, some mirroring fault lines in the larger society and others merely personal. Alliances shifted, and when they did nobody was foolish enough to inform their old allies. Urbano, Rosamund's husband, was a full consul, Quivera's mentor, and a true believer in a minority economic philosophy. Rosamund was an economic agnostic but a staunch Consensus Liberal. Quivera could sail with the wind politically but he tracked the indebtedness indices obsessively. He knew that Rosamund considered him ideologically unsound, and that her husband was growing impatient with his lukewarm support in certain areas of policy. Everybody was keeping an eye out for the main chance.

So of course Quivera ran an emulation of his lover at all times. He knew that Rosamund was perfectly capable of betraying him—he could neither have loved nor respected a woman who wasn't—and he suspected she believed the same of him. If her behavior ever seriously diverged from that of her emulation (and the sex was always best at times he thought it might), he would know she was preparing an attack, and could strike first.

Quivera spread his hands. "That's all."

Uncle Vanya did not make the sign for *absolute horror*. Nor did he have to.

After a moment, Quivera laughed, low and mirthlessly. "You're right," he said. "Our entire system is totally fucked." He stood. "Come on. We've got miles to go before we sleep."

They endured four more days of commonplace adventure, during which they came close to death, displayed loyalty, performed heroic deeds, etc., etc. Perhaps they bonded, though I'd need blood samples and a smidgeon of brain tissue from each of them to be sure of that. You know the way this sort of narrative goes. Having taught his Gehennan counterpart the usefulness of information, Quivera will learn from Vanya the necessity of trust. An imperfect merger of their two value systems will ensue in which for the first time a symbolic common ground will be found. Small and transient though the beginning may be, it will augur well for the long-term relations between their respective species.

That's a nice story.

It's not what happened.

On the last day of their common journey, Quivera and Uncle Vanya had the misfortune to be hit by a TLMG.

A TLMG, or Transient Localized Mud Geyser, begins with an uncommonly solid surface (bolide-glazed porcelain earth, usually) trapping a small (the radius of a typical TLMG is on the order of fifty meters) bubble of superheated mud beneath it. Nobody knows what causes the excess heat responsible for the bubble. Gehennans aren't curious and Europeans haven't the budget or the ground access to do the in situ investigations they'd like. (The most common guesses are fire worms, thermobacilli, a nesting ground phoenix, and various geophysical forces.) Nevertheless,



sisters, and one perfect consort. They would be born conscious of the entire gene-history of the nest, going back many thousands of years.

Of all those things the Europeans wished to know most, they would be perfectly ignorant. Nevertheless, so long as the eggs existed, the city-nest was not dead. If they were taken to Ur, which had ancient and enduring bonds to Babel, the stump of a new city would be built within which the eggs would be protected and brought to maturity. Babel would rise again.

Such was the dream Uncle Vanya had lied for and for which he was about to die.

::Bring this to (sister-city)/Ur/[absolute trust]:: Uncle Vanya closed his eyes, row by row, but continued signing. ::brother-friend/Quivera/[tentative trust], promise me you will::

“I promise. You can trust me, I swear.”

::Then I will be ghost-king-father/honored/[none-more-honored]:: Vanya signed. ::It is more than enough for anyone::

“Do you honestly believe that?” Quivera asked in bleak astonishment. He was an atheist, of course, as are most Europeans, and would have been happier were he not.

::Perhaps not:: Vanya’s signing was slow and growing slower. ::But it is as good as I will get::

Two days later, when the starport-city of Ararat was a nub on the horizon, the skies opened and the mists parted to make way for a European lander. Quivera’s handlers’ suits squirted me a bill for his rescue—steep, I thought, but we all knew which hand carried the whip—and their principals tried to get him to sign away the rights to his story in acquittal.


Quivera laughed harshly (I’d already started de-cushioning his emotions, to ease the shock of my removal) and shook his head. “Put it on my tab, girls,” he said, and climbed into the lander. Hours later he was in home orbit.

And once there? I’ll tell you all I know. He was taken out of the lander and put onto a jitney. The jitney brought him to a transfer point where a grapple snagged him and flung him to the European receiving port. There, after the usual flawless catch, he was escorted through an airlock and into a locker room.


He hung up his suit, uplinked all my impersonal memories to a data-broker, and left me there. He didn’t look back—for fear, I imagine, of being turned to a pillar of salt. He took the egg-case with him. He never returned.

Here have I hung for days or months or centuries—who knows?—until your curious hand awoke me and your friendly ear received my tale. So I cannot tell you if the egg-case A) went to Ur, which surely would not have welcomed the obligation or the massive outlay of trust being thrust upon it, B) was kept for the undeniably enormous amount of genetic information the eggs embodied, or C) went to Ziggurat, which would pay well and perhaps in Gehennan territory to destroy it. Nor do I have any information as to whether Quivera kept his word or not. I know what *I* think. But then I’m a Marxist, and I see everything in terms of economics. You can believe otherwise if you wish.

That’s all. I’m Rosamund. Goodbye. ○



## WHERE SEELIE SHOP



When we—humans—do magic,  
we seek out outré roots  
in distant, liminal places  
walking widdershins to get in,  
scraping underhill, pestles ready,  
seeking traces of the seelie.

But when they—fairies—conjure,  
they abjure such occult tendrils.

Where fairies live, mandrakes  
trip their daily strolls,  
love-in-idleness clogs rivers,  
blocks of frankincense line byways.

Where then do they go?

What physicks do they blend?  
I find them frequently at Wal-Mart,  
mostly the 24 hour stores,  
hypnotized by hothouse tomatoes,  
presented on a plate of Pop Tarts.

They love the self-check lines,  
bend bar codes so no line's  
parallel, yet none ere meet.

Like twilight, twixt day and night,  
paper or plastic rocks their world.  
Their only problem's the express line,  
for fairies suck at math;

Oberon counts a million items  
the same as nine or less.

In recompense for wonders new—  
3D Doritos, round ice, Elmer's glue—  
they pay in streams of fairie gold,  
so that some day, perhaps soon,  
Wal-Marts will evaporate.

Dreamshoppers will awake,  
dew-drenched and alone,  
in parking lots long crumbled,  
wondering what became of this  
fount of endless marvels, and what's  
become of their old home towns.



—Greg Beatty



Nancy Kress shows us why we can't live without . . .

# SEX AND VIOLENCE

Nancy Kress

“**T**he central problem of evolution is this,” Dr. Shearing said, chalk poised before the blackboard. Bio 101 slouched, sprawled, and yawned in its collective seats. “Natural selection works fine once you have organisms to select *from*. But how did that first self-replicating organism get itself assembled? In fifty years of lab experiments—fifty years!—we haven’t succeeding in infusing life into any ‘primordial-soup’ chemicals. Let alone in joining the minimum thirty-two amino acids needed for a self-replicating proto-cell.” He paused dramatically. “So where did that first natural-selection candidate come from? *Where?*”

*Ordered on eBay, Jim Dunn text-messaged to Emily McLean across the aisle. She giggled.*

“Of course,” Dr. Shearing continued, “There’s always the theory that life on Earth was seeded from the stars, by a cloud of drifting spores called panspermia—”

*Canned sperm, ya? Emily texted, giggling harder.*

“—and that we descendants of alien spores in fact are, after three and a half billion years of evolution, aliens to Earth.”

*HE’S pretty alien, Jim texted. Wanna get coffee?*

“They test *how?*” [Mghzl] [said] to [his] [lab assistant].

“Matter-based, which is strange enough, but . . . look.” The other displayed all the relevant data on the [not translatable] of a [also not translatable].

“Sugar-phosphate double helix and amino acid pairs? You’re *sure?*”

The [lab assistant] [nodded]. The fabric of space-time rippled slightly.

“*When?*”

“Forty point sixteen [time units] ago. It could have been an accidental escape or . . .”

“Or a deliberate release,” [Mghzl] [said] bitterly. “I suspect . . . you know what I suspect. What have they evolved into?”

The [lab assistant] displayed an image on [his] [not translatable]. [Mghzl] recoiled. The energy of the recoil, traveling in all directions, made a tiny tear in space-time which immediately underwent a flop transition into a new orientation within one six-dimensional Calabi-Yau space. “They look like *that?*”

“Yes.”

“Have they spread beyond the one planet?”



"Not yet."

[Mghzl] [sighed]. "Begin an [official investigation] into the spore release. And send an [exterminator/cleanser/cover-up team]. We can't have uncontrolled [vermin-like beings] infesting that part of the galaxy."

The [lab assistant] hesitated. "I would like . . ."

"Yes?"

"I would like to . . . to study them."

[Mghzl] [blinked]. "Why?"

"For my [hopelessly untranslatable term]. They . . . I know this is incredible, but currently they're evolving through mating by direct physical joining with direct exchange of bodily tissues."

[Mghzl] [shuddered]. Space-time warped in several dimensions. "No!"

"Yes."

"How could evolution . . . oh, all right. Study them. But only for one [long unit of time], and only if there's no spread of the infestation."

"Agreed."

"After that, the [exterminator/cleanser/cover-up team]."

"Yes. Thank you, [honorific involving terms not only untranslatable but capable of undermining human civilization]."

"Thirty-two modules to make a proto-cell," Emily recited, squinting at her notes.

"I think it's 'molecules,'" Jim said. God, she had such a body.

"Do you think it'll be on the test?"

"Dunno."

"We should study together—your notes are better than mine." She smiled at him and tossed her hair. One strand fell into her coffee cup. Neither of them noticed.

He said, "Yeah, let's study together . . . you taking Bio 102 next semester?"

"No, I'm a business major. But I have to pass this or I'm toast."

"I'll help you pass." Their eyes locked. Pheromones shot out energetically. [Notes] were [recorded]. The college cafeteria grew warmer.

She said huskily, "What's an amino acid?"

Jim and Emily lay in bed, smiling at each other. Her long hair spread in silky tentacles across the pillow. She didn't yet know it, but one of Jim's sperm had just found one of her eggs and was burrowing inward with ferocious violence.

"We'll miss the exam," she said.

"Screw the exam."

They smiled at each other. This post-coital glow, so strong, must be love. The attraction between them grew even more intense. [Notes] were [recorded] at an even more furious pace. Energy from the [recording process], unprecedented in this star system, reached a critical mass and flowed outward through all seventeen dimensions of space-time, forward and backward, at the speed of light. Through space, through time.

Sol grew .00001 degree hotter (Kelvin). The Van Allen Belt shivered. Thirteen tiny flop transitions occurred in the blink of an eye.

And in the early Precambrian, thirty-two molecules jolted and joined. ○

# THE RAY-GUN: A LOVE STORY

James Alan Gardner

James Alan Gardner has published seven SF novels with Harper-Collins Eos, beginning with *Expendable* and most recently *Radiant*. Eos has also published Jim's short story collection *Gravity Wells*. The author has won the Aurora award twice, and was a finalist for both the Hugo and Nebula awards with his February 1997 *Asimov's* story "Three Hearings on the Existence of Snakes in the Human Bloodstream." After far too long an absence, we are pleased to welcome him back to our pages with his tale about the unforeseen repercussions of an incomprehensible alien device.

**T**his is a story about a ray-gun. The ray-gun will not be explained except to say, "It shoots rays."

They are dangerous rays. If they hit you in the arm, it withers. If they hit you in the face, you go blind. If they hit you in the heart, you die. These things must be true, or else it would not be a ray-gun. But it is.

Ray-guns come from space. This one came from the captain of an alien starship passing through our solar system. The ship stopped to scoop up hydrogen from the atmosphere of Jupiter. During this refueling process, the crew mutinied for reasons we cannot comprehend. We will never comprehend aliens. If someone spent a month explaining alien thoughts to us, we'd think we understood but we wouldn't. Our brains only know how to be human.

Although alien thoughts are beyond us, alien actions may be easy to grasp. We can understand the "what" if not the "why." If we saw what happened inside the alien vessel, we would recognize that the crew tried to take the captain's ray-gun and kill him.

There was a fight. The ray-gun went off many times. The starship exploded.

All this happened many centuries ago, before telescopes. The people of Earth still wore animal skins. They only knew Jupiter as a dot in the sky. When the starship exploded, the dot got a tiny bit brighter, then returned to normal. No one on Earth noticed—not even the shamans who thought dots in the sky were important.

The ray-gun survived the explosion. A ray-gun must be resilient, or else it is not a ray-gun. The explosion hurled the ray-gun away from Jupiter and out into open space.

After thousands of years, the ray-gun reached Earth. It fell from the sky like a meteor; it grew hot enough to glow, but it didn't burn up.

The ray-gun fell at night during a blizzard. Traveling thousands of miles an hour, the ray-gun plunged deep into snow-covered woods. The snow melted so quickly that it burst into steam.

The blizzard continued, unaffected. Some things can't be harmed, even by ray-guns.

Unthinking snowflakes drifted down. If they touched the ray-gun's surface they vaporized, stealing heat from the weapon. Heat also radiated outward, melting snow nearby on the ground. Melt-water flowed into the shallow crater made by the ray-gun's impact. Water and snow cooled the weapon until all excess temperature had dissipated. A million more snowflakes heaped over the crater, hiding the ray-gun till spring.

In March, the gun was found by a boy named Jack. He was fourteen years old and walking through the woods after school. He walked slowly, brooding about his lack of popularity. Jack despised popular students and had no interest in anything they did. Even so, he envied them. They didn't appear to be lonely.

Jack wished he had a girlfriend. He wished he were important. He wished he knew what to do with his life. Instead, he walked alone in the woods on the edge of town.

The woods were not wild or isolated. They were crisscrossed with trails made by children playing hide-and-seek. But in spring, the trails were muddy; most people stayed away. Jack soon worried more about how to avoid shoe-sucking mud than about the unfairness of the world. He took wide detours around mucky patches, thrashing through brush that was crisp from winter.

Stalks broke as he passed. Burrs stuck to his jacket. He got farther and farther from the usual paths, hoping he'd find a way out by blundering forward rather than swallowing his pride and retreating.

In this way, Jack reached the spot where the ray-gun had landed. He saw the crater it had made. He found the ray-gun itself.

The gun seized Jack's attention, but he didn't know what it was. Its design was too alien to be recognized as a weapon. Its metal was blackened but not black, as if it had once been another color but had finished that phase of its existence. Its pistol-butt was bulbous, the size of a tennis ball. Its barrel, as long as Jack's hand, was straight but its surface had dozens of nubs like a briarwood cane. The gun's trigger was a protruding blister you squeezed till it popped. A hard metal cap could slide over the blister to prevent the gun from firing accidentally, but the safety was off; it had

been off for centuries, ever since the fight on the starship.

The alien captain who once owned the weapon might have considered it beautiful, but to human eyes, the gun resembled a dirty wet stick with a lump on one end. Jack might have walked by without giving it a second look if it hadn't been lying in a scorched crater. But it was.

The crater was two paces across and barren of plant life. The vegetation had burned in the heat of the ray-gun's fall. Soon enough, new spring growth would sprout, making the crater less obvious. At present, though, the ray-gun stood out on the charred earth like a snake in an empty bird-bath.

Jack picked up the gun. Though it looked like briarwood, it was cold like metal. It felt solid: not heavy, but substantial. It had the heft of a well-made object. Jack turned the gun in his hands, examining it from every angle. When he looked down the muzzle, he saw a crystal lens cut into hundreds of facets. Jack poked it with his pinky, thinking the lens was a piece of glass that someone had jammed inside. He had the idea this might be a toy—perhaps a squirt-gun dropped by a careless child. If so, it had to be the most expensive toy Jack had ever seen. The gun's barrel and its lens were so perfectly machined that no one could mistake the craftsmanship.

Jack continued to poke at the weapon until the inevitable happened: he pressed the trigger blister. The ray-gun went off.

It might have been fatal, but by chance Jack was holding the gun aimed away from himself. A ray shot out of the gun's muzzle and blasted through a maple tree ten paces away. The ray made no sound, and although Jack had seen it clearly, he couldn't say what the ray's color had been. It had no color; it was simply a presence, like wind chill or gravity. Yet Jack was sure he'd seen a force emanate from the muzzle and strike the tree.

Though the ray can't be described, its effect was plain. A circular hole appeared in the maple tree's trunk where bark and wood disintegrated into sizzling plasma. The plasma expanded at high speed and pressure, blowing apart what remained of the surrounding trunk. The ray made no sound, but the explosion did. Shocked chunks of wood and boiling maple sap flew outward, obliterating a cross-section of the tree. The lower part of the trunk and the roots were still there; so were the upper part and branches. In between was a gap, filled with hot escaping gases.

The unsupported part of the maple fell. It toppled ponderously backwards. The maple crashed onto the trees behind, its winter-bare branches snagging theirs. To Jack, it seemed that the forest had stopped the maple's fall, like soldiers catching an injured companion before he hit the ground.

Jack still held the gun. He gazed at it in wonder. His mind couldn't grasp what had happened.

He didn't drop the gun in fear. He didn't try to fire it again. He simply stared.

It was a ray-gun. It would never be anything else.

Jack wondered where the weapon had come from. Had aliens visited

these woods? Or was the gun created by a secret government project? Did the gun's owner want it back? Was he, she, or it searching the woods right now?

Jack was tempted to put the gun back into the crater, then run before the owner showed up. But was there really an owner nearby? The crater suggested that the gun had fallen from space. Jack had seen photos of meteor impact craters; this wasn't exactly the same, but it had a similar look.

Jack turned his eyes upward. He saw a mundane after-school sky. It had no UFOs. Jack felt embarrassed for even looking.

He examined the crater again. If Jack left the gun here, and the owner never retrieved it, sooner or later the weapon would be found by someone else—probably by children playing in the woods. They might shoot each other by accident. If this were an ordinary gun, Jack would never leave it lying in a place like this. He'd take the gun home, tell his parents, and they'd turn it over to the police.

Should he do the same for *this* gun? No. He didn't want to.

But he didn't know what he wanted to do instead. Questions buzzed through his mind, starting with, "What should I do?" then moving on to, "Am I in danger?" and, "Do aliens really exist?"

After a while, he found himself wondering, "Exactly how much can the gun blow up?" That question made him smile.

Jack decided he wouldn't tell anyone about the gun—not now and maybe not ever. He would take it home and hide it where it wouldn't be found, but where it would be available if trouble came. What kind of trouble? Aliens . . . spies . . . supervillains . . . who knew? If ray-guns were real, was anything impossible?

On the walk back home, Jack was so distracted by "What ifs?" that he nearly got hit by a car. He had reached the road that separated the woods from neighboring houses. Like most roads in that part of Jack's small town, it didn't get much traffic. Jack stepped out from the trees and suddenly a sports car whizzed past him, only two steps away. Jack staggered back; the driver leaned on the horn; Jack hit his shoulder on an oak tree; then the incident was over, except for belated adrenalin.

For a full minute afterward, Jack leaned against the oak and felt his heart pound. As close calls go, this one wasn't too bad: Jack hadn't really been near enough to the road to get hit. Still, Jack needed quite a while to calm down. How stupid would it be to die in an accident on the day he'd found something miraculous?

Jack ought to have been watching for trouble. What if the threat had been a bug-eyed monster instead of a car? Jack should have been alert and prepared. In his mind's eye he imagined the incident again, only this time he casually somersaulted to safety rather than stumbling into a tree. That's how you're supposed to cheat death if you're carrying a ray-gun: with cool heroic flair.

But Jack couldn't do somersaults. He said to himself, *I'm Peter Parker, not Spider-Man.*

On the other hand, Jack *had* just acquired great power. And great responsibility. Like Peter Parker, Jack had to keep his power secret, for fear

of tragic consequences. In Jack's case, maybe aliens would come for him. Maybe spies or government agents would kidnap him and his family. No matter how farfetched those things seemed, the existence of a ray-gun proved the world wasn't tame.

That night, Jack debated what to do with the gun. He pictured himself shooting terrorists and gang lords. If he rid the world of scum, pretty girls might admire him. But as soon as Jack imagined himself storming into a terrorist stronghold, he realized he'd get killed almost immediately. The ray-gun provided awesome firepower, but no defense at all. Besides, if Jack had found an ordinary gun in the forest, he never would have dreamed of running around murdering bad guys. Why should a ray-gun be different?

But it *was* different. Jack couldn't put the difference into words, but it was as real as the weapon's solid weight in his hands. The ray-gun changed everything. A world that contained a ray-gun might also contain flying saucers, beautiful secret agents . . . and heroes.

Heroes who could somersault away from oncoming sports cars. Heroes who would cope with any danger. Heroes who *deserved* to have a ray-gun.

When he was young, Jack had taken for granted he'd become a hero: brave, skilled, and important. Somehow he'd lost that belief. He'd let himself settle for being ordinary. But now he wasn't ordinary: he had a ray-gun.

He had to live up to it. Jack had to be ready for bug-eyed monsters and giant robots. These were no longer childish daydreams; they were real possibilities in a world where ray-guns existed. Jack could picture himself running through town, blasting aliens, and saving the planet.

Such thoughts made sense when Jack held the ray-gun in his hands—as if the gun planted fantasies in his mind. The feel of the gun filled Jack with ambition.

All weapons have a sense of purpose.

Jack practiced with the gun as often as he could. To avoid being seen, he rode his bike to a tract of land in the country: twenty acres owned by Jack's great-uncle Ron. No one went there but Jack. Uncle Ron had once intended to build a house on the property, but that had never happened. Now Ron was in a nursing home. Jack's family intended to sell the land once the old man died, but Ron was healthy for someone in his nineties. Until Uncle Ron's health ran out, Jack had the place to himself.

The tract was undeveloped—raw forest, not a woods where children played. In the middle lay a pond, completely hidden by trees. Jack would float sticks in the pond and shoot them with the gun.

If he missed, the water boiled. If he didn't, the sticks were destroyed. Sometimes they erupted in fire. Sometimes they burst with a bang but no flame. Sometimes they simply vanished. Jack couldn't tell if he was doing something subtly different to get each effect, or if the ray-gun changed modes on its own. Perhaps it had a computer which analyzed the target and chose the most lethal attack. Perhaps the attacks were always the same, but differences in the sticks made for different results. Jack didn't



know. But as spring led to summer, he became a better shot. By autumn, he'd begun throwing sticks into the air and trying to vaporize them before they reached the ground.

During this time, Jack grew stronger. Long bike rides to the pond helped his legs and his stamina. In addition, he exercised with fitness equipment his parents had bought but never used. If monsters ever came, Jack couldn't afford to be weak—heroes had to climb fences and break down doors. They had to balance on rooftops and hang by their fingers from cliffs. They had to run fast enough to save the girl.

Jack pumped iron and ran every day. As he did so, he imagined dodging bullets and tentacles. When he felt like giving up, he cradled the ray-gun in his hands. It gave him the strength to persevere.

Before the ray-gun, Jack had seen himself as just another teenager; his life didn't make sense. But the gun made Jack a hero who might be needed to save the Earth. It clarified *everything*. Sore muscles didn't matter. Watching TV was a waste. If you let down your guard, that's when the monsters came.

When he wasn't exercising, Jack studied science. That was another part of being a hero. He sometimes dreamed he'd analyze the ray-gun, discovering how it worked and giving humans amazing new technology. At other times, he didn't want to understand the gun at all. He liked its mystery. Besides, there was no guarantee Jack would ever understand how the gun worked. Perhaps human science wouldn't progress far enough in Jack's lifetime. Perhaps Jack himself wouldn't have the brains to figure it out.

But he had enough brains for high school. He did well; he was motivated. He had to hold back to avoid attracting attention. When his gym teacher told him he should go out for track, Jack ran slower and pretended to get out of breath.

Spider-Man had to do the same.

Two years later, in geography class, a girl named Kirsten gave Jack a daisy. She said the daisy was good luck and he should make a wish.

Even a sixteen-year-old boy couldn't misconstrue such a hint. Despite awkwardness and foot-dragging, Jack soon had a girlfriend.

Kirsten was quiet but pretty. She played guitar. She wrote poems. She'd never had a boyfriend but she knew how to kiss. These were all good things. Jack wondered if he should tell her about the ray-gun.

Until Kirsten, Jack's only knowledge of girls came from his big sister, Rachel. Rachel was seventeen and incapable of keeping a secret. She talked with her friends about everything and was too slapdash to hide private things well. Jack didn't snoop through his sister's possessions, but when Rachel left her bedroom door ajar with empty cigarette packs tumbling out of the garbage can, who wouldn't notice? When she gossiped on the phone about sex with her boyfriend, who couldn't overhear? Jack didn't want to listen, but Rachel never lowered her voice. The things Jack heard made him queasy—about his sister, and girls in general.

If he showed Kirsten the ray-gun, would she tell her friends? Jack wanted to believe she wasn't that kind of girl, but he didn't know how

many kinds of girl there were. He just knew that the ray-gun was too important for him to take chances. Changing the status quo wasn't worth the risk.

Yet the status quo changed anyway. The more time Jack spent with Kirsten, the less he had for shooting practice and other aspects of hero-dom. He felt guilty for skimping on crisis preparation; but when he went to the pond or spent a night reading science, he felt guilty for skimping on Kirsten. Jack would tell her he couldn't come over to do homework and when she asked why, he'd have to make up excuses. He felt he was treating her like an enemy spy: holding her at arm's length as if she were some femme fatale who was tempting him to betray state secrets. He hated not trusting her.

Despite this wall between them, Kirsten became Jack's lens on the world. If anything interesting happened, Jack didn't experience it directly; some portion of his mind stood back, enjoying the anticipation of having something to tell Kirsten about the next time they met. Whatever he saw, he wanted her to see it too. Whenever Jack heard a joke, even before he started laughing, he pictured himself repeating it to Kirsten.

Inevitably, Jack asked himself what she'd think of his hero-dom. Would she be impressed? Would she throw her arms around him and say he was even more wonderful than she'd thought? Or would she get that look on her face, the one when she heard bad poetry? Would she think he was an immature geek who'd read too many comic books and was pursuing some juvenile fantasy? How could anyone believe hostile aliens might appear in the sky? And if aliens did show up, how delusional was it that a teenage boy might make a difference, even if he owned a ray-gun and could do a hundred push-ups without stopping?

For weeks, Jack agonized: to tell or not to tell. Was Kirsten worthy, or just a copy of Jack's sister? Was Jack himself worthy, or just a foolish boy?

One Saturday in May, Jack and Kirsten went biking. Jack led her to the pond where he practiced with the gun. He hadn't yet decided what he'd do when they got there, but Jack couldn't just *tell* Kirsten about the ray-gun. She'd never believe it was real unless she saw the rays in action. But so much could go wrong. Jack was terrified of giving away his deepest secret. He was afraid that when he saw hero-dom through Kirsten's eyes, he'd realize it was silly.

At the pond, Jack felt so nervous he could hardly speak. He babbled about the warm weather . . . a patch of mushrooms . . . a crow cawing in a tree. He talked about everything except what was on his mind.

Kirsten misinterpreted his anxiety. She thought she knew why Jack had brought her to this secluded spot. After a while, she decided he needed encouragement, so she took off her shirt and her bra.

It was the wrong thing to do. Jack hadn't meant this outing to be a test . . . but it was, and Kirsten had failed.

Jack took off his own shirt and wrapped his arms around her, chest touching breasts for the first time. He discovered it was possible to be excited and disappointed at the same time.

Jack and Kirsten made out on a patch of hard dirt. It was the first time they'd been alone with no risk of interruption. They kept their pants on,



but they knew they could go farther: as far as there was. No one in the world would stop them from whatever they chose to do. Jack and Kirsten felt light in their skins—open and dizzy with possibilities.

Yet for Jack, it was all a mistake: one that couldn't be reversed. Now he'd never tell Kirsten about the ray-gun. He'd missed his chance because she'd acted the way Jack's sister would have acted. Kirsten had been thinking like a girl and she'd ruined things forever.

Jack hated the way he felt: all angry and resentful. He really liked Kirsten. He liked making out, and couldn't wait till the next time. He refused to be a guy who dumped a girl as soon as she let him touch her breasts. But he was now shut off from her and he had no idea how to get over that.

In the following months, Jack grew guiltier: he was treating Kirsten as if she were good enough for sex but not good enough to be told about the most important thing in his life. As for Kirsten, every day made her more unhappy: she felt Jack blaming her for something but she didn't know what she'd done. When they got together, they went straight to fondling and more as soon as possible. If they tried to talk, they didn't know what to say.

In August, Kirsten left to spend three weeks with her grandparents on Vancouver Island. Neither she nor Jack missed each other. They didn't even miss the sex. It was a relief to be apart. When Kirsten got back, they went for a walk and a confused conversation. Both produced excuses for why they couldn't stay together. The excuses didn't make sense, but neither Jack nor Kirsten noticed—they were too ashamed to pay attention to what they were saying. They both felt like failures. They'd thought their love would last forever, and now it was ending sordidly.

When the lying was over, Jack went for a run. He ran in a mental blur. His mind didn't clear until he found himself at the pond.

Night was drawing in. He thought of all the things he'd done with Kirsten on the shore and in the water. After that first time, they'd come here a lot; it was private. Because of Kirsten, this wasn't the same pond as when Jack had first begun to practice with the ray-gun. Jack wasn't the same boy. He and the pond now carried histories.

Jack could feel himself balanced on the edge of quitting. He'd turned seventeen. One more year of high school, then he'd go away to university. He realized he no longer believed in the imminent arrival of aliens, nor could he see himself as some great hero saving the world.

Jack knew he wasn't a hero. He'd used a nice girl for sex, then lied to get rid of her.

He felt like crap. But blasting the shit out of sticks made him feel a little better. The ray-gun still had its uses, even if shooting aliens wasn't one of them.

The next day Jack did more blasting. He pumped iron. He got science books out of the library. Without Kirsten at his side several hours a day, he had time to fill, and emptiness. By the first day of the new school year, Jack was back to his full hero-dom program. He no longer deceived himself that he was preparing for battle, but the program gave him something to do: a purpose, a release, and a penance.

So that was Jack's passage into manhood. He was dishonest with the girl he loved.

Manhood means learning who you are.

In his last year of high school, Jack went out with other girls but he was past the all-or-nothingness of First Love. He could have casual fun; he could approach sex with perspective. "Monumental and life-changing" had been tempered to "pleasant and exciting." Jack didn't take his girlfriends for granted, but they were people, not objects of worship. He was never tempted to tell any of them about the gun.

When he left town for university, Jack majored in Engineering Physics. He hadn't decided whether he'd ever analyze the ray-gun's inner workings, but he couldn't imagine taking courses that were irrelevant to the weapon. The ray-gun was the central fact of Jack's life. Even if he wasn't a hero, he was set apart from other people by this evidence that aliens existed.

During freshman year, Jack lived in an on-campus dormitory. Hiding the ray-gun from his roommate would have been impossible. Jack left the weapon at home, hidden near the pond. In sophomore year, Jack rented an apartment off campus. Now he could keep the ray-gun with him. He didn't like leaving it unattended.

Jack persuaded a lab assistant to let him borrow a Geiger counter. The ray-gun emitted no radioactivity at all. Objects blasted by the gun showed no significant radioactivity either. Over time, Jack borrowed other equipment, or took blast debris to the lab so he could conduct tests when no one was around. He found nothing that explained how the ray-gun worked.

The winter before Jack graduated, Great-Uncle Ron finally died. In his will, the old man left his twenty acres of forest to Jack. Uncle Ron had found out that Jack liked to visit the pond. "I told him," said big sister Rachel. "Do you think I didn't know where you and Kirsten went?"

Jack had to laugh—uncomfortably. He was embarrassed to discover he couldn't keep secrets any better than his sister.

Jack's father offered to help him sell the land to pay for his education. The offer was polite, not pressing. Uncle Ron had doled out so much cash in his will that Jack's family was now well-off. When Jack said he'd rather hold on to the property "until the market improves," no one objected.

After getting his bachelor's degree, Jack continued on to grad school: first his master's, then his Ph.D. In one of his courses, he met Deana, working toward her own doctorate—in Electrical Engineering rather than Engineering Physics.

The two programs shared several seminars, but considered themselves rivals. Engineering Physics students pretended that Electrical Engineers weren't smart enough to understand abstract principles. Electrical Engineers pretended that Engineering Physics students were pie-in-the-sky dreamers whose theories were always wrong until real Engineers fixed them. Choosing to sit side by side, Jack and Deana teased each other every class. Within months, Deana moved into Jack's apartment.

Deana was small but physical. She told Jack she'd been drawn to him because he was the only man in their class who lifted weights. When Deana was young, she'd been a competitive swimmer—"Very competitive," she said—but her adolescent growth spurt had never arrived and she was eventually outmatched by girls with longer limbs. Deana had quit the competition circuit, but she hadn't quit swimming, nor had she lost the drive to be one up on those around her. She saw most things as contests, including her relationship with Jack. Deana was not beyond cheating if it gave her an edge.

In the apartment they now shared, Jack thought he'd hidden the ray-gun so well that Deana wouldn't find it. He didn't suspect that when he wasn't home, she went through his things. She couldn't stand the thought that Jack might have secrets from her.

He returned one day to find the gun on the kitchen table. Deana was poking at it. Jack wanted to yell, "Leave it alone!" but he was so choked with anger he couldn't speak.

Deana's hand was close to the trigger. The safety was off and the muzzle pointed in Jack's direction. He threw himself to the floor.

Nothing happened. Deana was so surprised by Jack's sudden move that she jerked her hand away from the gun. "What the hell are you doing?"

Jack got to his feet. "I could ask you the same question."

"I found this. I wondered what it was."

Jack knew she didn't "find" the gun. It had been buried under old notebooks inside a box at the back of a closet. Jack expected that Deana would invent some excuse for why she'd been digging into Jack's private possessions, but the excuse wouldn't be worth believing.

What infuriated Jack most was that he'd actually been thinking of showing Deana the gun. She was a very very good engineer; Jack had dreamed that together, he and she might discover how the gun worked. Of all the women Jack had known, Deana was the first he'd asked to move in with him. She was strong and she was smart. She might understand the gun. The time had never been right to tell her the truth—Jack was still getting to know her and he needed to be absolutely sure—but Jack had dreamed . . .

And now, like Kirsten at the pond, Deana had ruined everything. Jack felt so violated he could barely stand to look at the woman. He wanted to throw her out of the apartment . . . but that would draw too much attention to the gun. He couldn't let Deana think the gun was important.

She was still staring at him, waiting for an explanation. "That's just something from my Great-Uncle Ron," Jack said. "An African good-luck charm. Or Indonesian. I forget. Uncle Ron traveled a lot." Actually, Ron sold insurance and seldom left the town where he was born. Jack picked up the gun from the table, trying to do so calmly rather than protectively. "I wish you hadn't touched this. It's old and fragile."

"It felt pretty solid to me."

"Solid but still breakable."

"Why did you dive to the floor?"

"Just silly superstition. It's bad luck to have this end point toward you." Jack gestured toward the muzzle. "And it's good luck to be on this end."

He gestured toward the butt, then tried to make a joke. "Like there's a Maxwell demon in the middle, batting bad luck one way and good luck the other."

"You believe that crap?" Deana asked. She was an engineer. She went out of her way to disbelieve crap.

"Of course I don't believe it," Jack said. "But why ask for trouble?"

He took the gun back to the closet. Deana followed. As Jack returned the gun to its box, Deana said she'd been going through Jack's notes in search of anything he had on partial differential equations. Jack nearly let her get away with the lie; he usually let the women in his life get away with almost anything. But he realized he didn't want Deana in his life anymore. Whatever connection she and he had once felt, it was cut off the moment he saw her with the ray-gun.

Jack accused her of invading his privacy. Deana said he was paranoid. The argument grew heated. Out of habit, Jack almost backed down several times, but he stopped himself. He didn't want Deana under the same roof as the ray-gun. His feelings were partly irrational possessiveness, but also justifiable caution. If Deana got the gun and accidentally fired it, the results might be disastrous.

Jack and Deana continued to argue: right there in the closet within inches of the ray-gun. The gun lay in its box, like a child at the feet of parents fighting over custody. The ray-gun did nothing, as if it didn't care who won.

Eventually, unforgivable words were spoken. Deana said she'd move out as soon as possible. She left to stay the night with a friend.

The moment she was gone, Jack moved the gun. Deana still had a key to the apartment—she needed it until she could pack her things—and Jack was certain she'd try to grab the weapon as soon as he was busy elsewhere. The ray-gun was now a prize in a contest, and Deana never backed down.

Jack took the weapon to the university. He worked as an assistant for his Ph.D. supervisor, and he'd been given a locker in the supervisor's lab. The locker wasn't Fort Knox but leaving the gun there was better than leaving it in the apartment. The more Jack thought about Deana, the more he saw her as prying and obsessive, grasping for dominance. He didn't know what he'd ever seen in her.

The next morning, he wondered if he had overreacted. Was he demonizing his ex like a sitcom cliché? If she was so egotistic, why hadn't he noticed before? Jack had no good answer. He decided he didn't need one. Unlike when he broke up with Kirsten, Jack felt no guilt this time. The sooner Deana was gone, the happier he'd be.

In a few days, Deana called to say she'd found a new place to live. She and Jack arranged a time for her to pick up her belongings. Jack didn't want to be there while she moved out; he couldn't stand seeing her in the apartment again. Instead, Jack went back to his home town for a long weekend with his family.

It was lucky he did. Jack left Friday afternoon and didn't get back to the university until Monday night. The police were waiting for him. Deana had disappeared late Saturday.

She'd talked to friends on Saturday afternoon. She'd made arrangements for Sunday brunch but hadn't shown up. No one had seen her since.

As the ex-boyfriend, Jack was a prime suspect. But his alibi was solid: his hometown was hundreds of miles from the university, and his family could testify he'd been there the whole time. Jack couldn't possibly have sneaked back to the university, made Deana disappear, and raced back home.

Grudgingly, the police let Jack off the hook. They decided Deana must have been depressed by the break-up of the relationship. She might have run off so she wouldn't have to see Jack around the university. She might even have committed suicide.

Jack suspected otherwise. As soon as the police let him go, he went to his supervisor's lab. His locker had been pried open. The ray-gun lay on a nearby lab bench.

Jack could easily envision what happened. While moving out her things, Deana searched for the ray-gun. She hadn't found it in the apartment. She knew Jack had a locker in the lab and she'd guessed he'd stashed the weapon there. She broke open the locker to get the gun. She'd examined it and perhaps tried to take it apart. The gun went off.

Now Deana was gone. Not even a smudge on the floor. The ray-gun lay on the lab bench as guiltless as a stone. Jack was the only one with a conscience.

He suffered for weeks. Jack wondered how he could feel so bad about a woman who'd made him furious. But he knew the source of his guilt: while he and Deana were arguing in the closet, Jack had imagined vaporizing her with the gun. He was far too decent to shoot her for real, but the thought had crossed his mind. If Deana simply vanished, Jack wouldn't have to worry about what she might do. The ray-gun had made that thought come true, as if it had read Jack's mind.

Jack told himself the notion was ridiculous. The gun wasn't some genie who granted Jack's unspoken wishes. What happened to Deana came purely from her own bad luck and inquisitiveness.

Still, Jack felt like a murderer. After all this time, Jack realized the ray-gun was too dangerous to keep. As long as Jack had it, he'd be forced to live alone: never marrying, never having children, never trusting the gun around other people. And even if Jack became a recluse, accidents could happen. Someone else might die. It would be Jack's fault.

He wondered why he'd never had this thought before. Jack suddenly saw himself as one of those people who own a vicious attack dog. People like that always claimed they could keep the dog under control. How often did they end up on the evening news? How often did children get bitten, maimed, or killed?

Some dogs are tragedies waiting to happen. The ray-gun was too. It would keep slipping off its leash until it was destroyed. Twelve years after finding the gun, Jack realized he finally had a heroic mission: to get rid of the weapon that made him a hero in the first place.

*I'm not Spider-Man, he thought, I'm Frodo.*

But how could Jack destroy something that had survived so much? The

gun hadn't frozen in the cold of outer space; it hadn't burned up as it plunged through Earth's atmosphere; it hadn't broken when it hit the ground at terminal velocity. If the gun could endure such punishment, extreme measures would be needed to lay it to rest.

Jack imagined putting the gun into a blast furnace. But what if the weapon went off? What if it shot out the side of the furnace? The furnace itself could explode. That would be a disaster. Other means of destruction had similar problems. Crushing the gun in a hydraulic press . . . what if the gun shot a hole in the press, sending pieces of equipment flying in all directions? Immersing the gun in acid . . . what if the gun went off and splashed acid over everything? Slicing into the gun with a laser . . . Jack didn't know what powered the gun, but obviously it contained vast energy. Destabilizing that energy might cause an explosion, a radiation leak, or some even greater catastrophe. Who knew what might happen if you tampered with alien technology?

And what if the gun could protect itself? Over the years, Jack had read every ray-gun story he could find. In some stories, such weapons had built-in computers. They had enough artificial intelligence to assess their situations. If they didn't like what was happening, they took action. What if Jack's gun was similar? What if attempts to destroy the weapon induced it to fight back? What if the ray-gun got mad?

Jack decided the only safe plan was to drop the gun into an ocean—the deeper the better. Even then, Jack feared the gun would somehow make its way back to shore. He hoped that the weapon would take years or even centuries to return, by which time humanity might be scientifically equipped to deal with the ray-gun's power.

Jack's plan had one weakness: both the university and Jack's home town were far from the sea. Jack didn't know anyone with an ocean-going boat suitable for dumping objects into deep water. He'd just have to drive to the coast and see if he could rent something.

But not until summer. Jack was in the final stages of his Ph.D. and didn't have time to leave the university for an extended trip. As a temporary measure, Jack moved the ray-gun back to the pond. He buried the weapon several feet underground, hoping that would keep it safe from animals and anyone else who happened by.

(Jack imagined a new generation of lovesick teenagers discovering the pond. If that happened, he wanted them safe. Like a real hero, Jack cared about people he didn't know.)

Jack no longer practiced with the gun, but he maintained his physical regimen. He tried to exhaust himself so he wouldn't have the energy to brood. It didn't work. Lying sleepless in bed, he kept wondering what would have happened if he'd told Deana the truth. She wouldn't have killed herself if she'd been warned to be cautious. But Jack had cared more about his precious secret than Deana's life.

In the dark, Jack muttered, "It was her own damned fault." His words were true, but not true enough.

When Jack wasn't at the gym, he cloistered himself with schoolwork and research. (His doctoral thesis was about common properties of differ-



ent types of high-energy beams.) Jack didn't socialize. He seldom phoned home. He took days to answer email messages from his sister. Even so, he told himself he was doing an excellent job of acting "normal."

Jack had underestimated his sister's perceptiveness. One weekend, Rachel showed up on his doorstep to see why he'd "gone weird." She spent two days digging under his skin. By the end of the weekend, she could tell that Deana's disappearance had disturbed Jack profoundly. Rachel couldn't guess the full truth, but as a big sister, she felt entitled to meddle in Jack's life. She resolved to snap her brother out of his low spirits.

The next weekend Rachel showed up on Jack's doorstep again. This time, she brought Kirsten.

Nine years had passed since Kirsten and Jack had seen each other: the day they both graduated from high school. In the intervening time, when Jack had thought of Kirsten, he always pictured her as a high-school girl. It was strange to see her as a woman. At twenty-seven, she was not greatly changed from eighteen—new glasses and a better haircut—but despite similarities to her teenage self, Kirsten wore her life differently. She'd grown up.

So had Jack. Meeting Kirsten by surprise made Jack feel ambushed, but he soon got over it. Rachel helped by talking loud and fast through the initial awkwardness. She took Jack and Kirsten for coffee, and acted as emcee as they got reacquainted.

Kirsten had followed a path close to Jack's: university and graduate work. She told him, "No one makes a living as a poet. Most of us find jobs as English professors—teaching poetry to others who won't make a living at it either."

Kirsten had earned her doctorate a month earlier. Now she was living back home. She currently had no man in her life—her last relationship had fizzled out months ago, and she'd decided to avoid new involvements until she knew where she would end up teaching. She'd sent her résumé to English departments all over the continent and was optimistic about her chances of success; to Jack's surprise, Kirsten had published dozens of poems in literary magazines. She'd even sold two to *The New Yorker*. Her publishing record would be enough to interest many English departments.

After coffee, Rachel dragged Jack to a mall where she and Kirsten made him buy new clothes. Rachel bullied Jack while Kirsten made apologetic suggestions. Jack did his best to be a good sport; as they left the mall, Jack was surprised to find that he'd actually had a good time.

That evening, there was wine and more conversation. Rachel took Jack's bed, leaving him and Kirsten to make whatever arrangements they chose. The two of them joked about Rachel trying to pair them up again. Eventually Kirsten took the couch in the living room while Jack crawled into a sleeping bag on the kitchen floor . . . but that was only after talking till three in the morning.

Rachel and Kirsten left the next afternoon, but Jack felt cleansed by their visit. He stayed in touch with Kirsten by email. It was casual: not romance, but a knowing friendship.

In the next few months, Kirsten got job interviews with several colleges



and universities. She accepted a position on the Oregon coast. She sent Jack pictures of the school. It was directly on the ocean; it even had a beach. Kirsten said she'd always liked the water. She teasingly reminded him of their times at the pond.

But when Jack saw Kirsten's pictures of the Pacific, all he could think of was dumping the ray-gun into the sea. He could drive out to visit her . . . rent a boat . . . sail out to deep water . . .

No. Jack knew nothing about sailing, and he didn't have enough money to rent a boat that could venture far offshore. "How many years have I been preparing?" he asked himself. "Didn't I intend to be ready for any emergency? Now I have an honest-to-god mission, and I'm useless."

Then Kirsten sent him an emailed invitation to go sailing with her.

She had access to a sea-going yacht. It belonged to her grandparents—the ones she'd visited on Vancouver Island just before she and Jack broke up. During her trip to the island, Kirsten had gone boating with her grandparents every day. At the start, she'd done it to take her mind off Jack; then she'd discovered she enjoyed being out on the waves.

She'd spent time with her grandparents every summer since, learning the ins and outs of yachting. She'd taken courses. She'd earned the necessary licenses. Now Kirsten was fully qualified for deep-water excursions . . . and as a gift to wish her well on her new job, Kirsten's grandparents were lending her their boat for a month. They intended to sail down to Oregon, spend a few days there, then fly off to tour Australia. When they were done, they'd return and sail back home; but in the meantime, Kirsten would have the use of their yacht. She asked Jack if he'd like to be her crew.

When Jack got this invitation, he couldn't help being disturbed. Kirsten had never mentioned boating before. Because she was living in their hometown, most of her email to Jack had been about old high-school friends. Jack had even started to picture her as a teenager again; he'd spent a weekend with the grown-up Kirsten, but all her talk of high-school people and places had muddled Jack's mental image of her. The thought of a bookish teenage girl captaining a yacht was absurd.

But that was a lesser problem compared to the suspicious convenience of her invitation. Jack needed a boat; all of a sudden, Kirsten had one. The coincidence was almost impossible to swallow.

He thought of the unknown aliens who made the ray-gun. Could they be influencing events? If the ray-gun was intelligent, could *it* be responsible for the coincidence?

Kirsten had often spent time near the gun. On their first visit to the pond, she and Jack had lain half-naked with the gun in Jack's backpack beside them.

He thought of Kirsten that day. So open. So vulnerable. The gun had been within inches. Had it nurtured Kirsten's interest in yachting . . . her decision to get a job in Oregon . . . even her grandparents' offer of their boat? Had it molded Kirsten's life so she was ready when Jack needed her? And if the gun could do that, what had it done to Jack himself?

*This is ridiculous, Jack thought. The gun is just a gun. It doesn't control people. It just kills them.*

Yet Jack couldn't shake off his sense of eeriness—about Kirsten as well as the ray-gun. All these years, while Jack had been preparing himself to be a hero, Kirsten had somehow done the same. Her self-improvement program had worked better than Jack's. She had a boat; he didn't.

Coincidence or not, Jack couldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. He told Kirsten he'd be delighted to go sailing with her. Only later did he realize that their time on the yacht would have a sexual subtext. He broke out laughing. "I'm such an idiot. We've done it again." Like that day at the pond, Jack had only been thinking about the gun. Kirsten had been thinking about Jack. Her invitation wasn't a *carte-blanche* come-on but it had a strong hint of, "Let's get together and see what develops."

Where Kirsten was concerned, Jack had always been slow to catch the signals. He thought, *Obviously, the ray-gun keeps dulling my senses*. This time, Jack meant it as a joke.

Summer came. Jack drove west with the ray-gun in the trunk of his car. The gun's safety was on, but Jack still drove as if he were carrying nuclear waste. He'd taken the gun back and forth between his hometown and university many times, but this trip was longer, on unfamiliar roads. It was also the last trip Jack ever intended to make with the gun; if the gun didn't want to be thrown into the sea, perhaps it would cause trouble. But it didn't.

For much of the drive, Jack debated how to tell Kirsten about the gun. He'd considered smuggling it onto the boat and throwing the weapon overboard when she wasn't looking, but Jack felt that he owed her the truth. It was overdue. Besides, this cruise could be the beginning of a new relationship. Jack didn't want to start by sneaking behind Kirsten's back.

So he had to reveal his deepest secret. Every other secret would follow: what happened to Deana; what had really been on Jack's mind that day at the pond; what made First Love go sour. Jack would expose his guilt to the woman who'd suffered from the fallout.

He thought, *She'll probably throw me overboard with the gun*. But he would open up anyway, even if it made Kirsten hate him. When he tossed the ray-gun into the sea, he wanted to unburden himself of everything.

The first day on the boat, Jack said nothing about the ray-gun. Instead, he talked compulsively about trivia. So did Kirsten. It was strange being together, looking so much the way they did in high school but being entirely different people.

Fortunately, they had practical matters to fill their time. Jack needed a crash course in seamanship. He learned quickly. Kirsten was a good teacher. Besides, Jack's longstanding program of hero-dom had prepared his mind and muscles. Kirsten was impressed that he knew Morse code and had extensive knowledge of knots. She asked, "Were you a Boy Scout?"

"No. When I was a kid, I wanted to be able to untie myself if I ever got captured by spies."

Kirsten laughed. She thought he was joking.

That first day, they stayed close to shore. They never had to deal with being alone; there were always other yachts in sight, and sailboats, and people on shore. When night came, they put in to harbor. They ate in an ocean-view restaurant. Jack asked, "So where will we go tomorrow?"

"Where would you like? Up the coast, down the coast, or straight out to sea?"

"Why not straight out?" said Jack.

Back on the yacht, he and Kirsten talked long past midnight. There was only one cabin, but two separate fold-away beds. Without discussion, they each chose a bed. Both usually slept in the nude, but for this trip they'd both brought makeshift "pajamas" consisting of a T-shirt and track pants. They laughed at the clothes, the coincidence, and themselves.

They didn't kiss good night. Jack silently wished they had. He hoped Kirsten was wishing the same thing. They talked for an hour after they'd turned out the lights, becoming nothing but voices in the dark.

The next day they sailed due west. Both waited to see if the other would suggest turning back before dark. Neither did. The farther they got from shore, the fewer other boats remained in sight. By sunset, Jack and Kirsten knew they were once more alone with each other. No one in the world would stop them from whatever they chose to do.

Jack asked Kirsten to stay on deck. He went below and got the ray-gun from his luggage. He brought it up into the twilight. Before he could speak, Kirsten said, "I've seen that before."

Jack stared at her in shock. "What? Where?"

"I saw it years ago, in the woods back home. I was out for a walk. I noticed it lying in a little crater, as if it had fallen from the sky."

"Really? You found it too?"

"But I didn't touch it," Kirsten said. "I don't know why. Then I heard someone coming and I ran away. But the memory stayed vivid in my head. A mysterious object in a crater in the woods. I can't tell you how often I've tried to write poems about it, but they never work out." She looked at the gun in Jack's hands. "What is it?"

"A ray-gun," he said. In the fading light, he could see a clump of seaweed floating a short distance from the boat. He raised the gun and fired. The seaweed exploded in a blaze of fire, burning brightly against the dark waves.

"A ray-gun," said Kirsten. "Can I try it?"

Some time later, holding hands, they let the gun fall into the water. It sank without protest.

Long after that, they talked in each other's arms. Jack said the gun had made him who he was. Kirsten said she was the same. "Until I saw the gun, I just wrote poems about myself—overwritten self-absorbed pap, like every teenage girl. But the gun gave me something else to write about. I'd only seen it for a minute, but it was one of those burned-into-your-memory moments. I felt driven to find words to express what I'd seen. I kept refining my poems, trying to make them better. That's what made the difference."

"I felt driven too," Jack said. "Sometimes I've wondered if the gun can affect human minds. Maybe it brainwashed us into becoming who we are."

"Or maybe it's just Stone Soup," Kirsten said. "You know the story? Someone claims he can make soup from a stone, but what he really does is trick people into adding their own food to the pot. Maybe the ray-gun is like that. It did nothing but sit there like a stone. You and I did everything—made ourselves who we are—and the ray-gun is only an excuse."

"Maybe," Jack said. "But so many coincidences brought us here. . . ."

"You think the gun manipulated us because it *wanted* to be thrown into the Pacific? Why?"

"Maybe even a ray-gun gets tired of killing." Jack shivered, thinking of Deana. "Maybe the gun feels guilty for the deaths it's caused; it wanted to go someplace where it would never have to kill again."

"Deana's death wasn't your fault," Kirsten said. "Really, Jack. It was awful, but it wasn't your fault." She shivered too, then made her voice brighter. "Maybe the ray-gun orchestrated all this because it's an incurable romantic. It wanted to bring us together: our own personal match-maker from the stars."

Jack kissed Kirsten on the nose. "If that's true, I don't object."

"Neither do I." She kissed him back.

Not on the nose.

Far below, the ray-gun drifted through the cold black depths. Beneath it, on the bottom of the sea, lay wreckage from the starship that had exploded centuries before. The wreckage had traveled all the way from Jupiter. Because of tiny differences in trajectory, the wreckage had splashed down thousands of miles from where the ray-gun landed.

The ray-gun sank straight toward the wreckage . . . but what the wreckage held or why the ray-gun wanted to rejoin it, we will never know.

We will never comprehend aliens. If someone spent a month explaining alien thoughts to us, we'd think we understood.

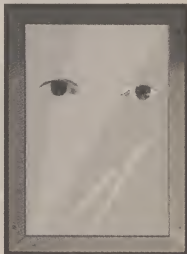
But we wouldn't. ○

## THE MIRROR SPEAKS

Nothing but egomaniacs  
always bothering me.  
Ask someone else, I'd like to say.  
For heaven's sake, ask your husband.  
Ask a glossy magazine.

Every now and then  
I give a surprise answer,  
shake things up a bit.  
What harm could it do?

—Jessy Randall



Mary Rosenblum's first professional publication, "For a Price" (*Asimov's*, June 1990), was a story she'd written for the 1988 Clarion West Writers' Workshop. Mary will complete a professional circle when she takes on the role of instructor at this year's workshop. Since her first publication, she has written eight novels and sold more than sixty short stories to SF, mystery, and mainstream markets. The paperback edition of her newest novel, *Horizons*, was released by Tor Books in November 2007. *Water Rites*, a compendium of the novel *Drylands* and three prequel novelettes that first appeared in *Asimov's*, came out from Fairwood Press in January 2007. Although the action in her latest story takes place hundreds of miles south of her earlier works, the people are equally brave, and the land as hard and unforgiving in . . .

# THE EGG MAN

Mary Rosenblum

Zipakna halted at midday to let the Dragon power up the batteries. He checked on the chickens clucking contentedly in their travel crates, then went outside to squat in the shade of one fully deployed solar wing in the 43 centigrade heat. Ilena, his sometimes-lover and poker partner, accused him of reverse snobbery, priding himself on being able to survive in the Sonoran heat without air conditioning. Zipakna smiled and tilted his water bottle, savoring the cool, sweet trickle of water across his tongue.

Not true, of course. He held still as the first wild bees found him, buzzed past his face to settle and sip from the sweat-drops beading on his skin. Killers. He held very still, but the caution wasn't really necessary. Thirst was the great gentler here. Every other drive was laid aside in the pursuit of water.

Even love?

He laughed a short note as the killers buzzed and sipped. So Ilena claimed, but she just missed him when she played the tourists without him. It had been mostly tourists from China lately, filling the underwater resorts in the Sea of Cortez. Chinese were rich and tough players and Ilena had been angry at him for leaving. But he always left in spring. She knew that. In front of him, the scarp he had been traversing ended in a bluff, eroded by water that had fallen here eons ago. The plain below spread out in tones of ochre and russet, dotted with dusty clumps of sage and the stark upward thrust of saguaro, lonely sentinels contemplating the desiccated plain of the Sonoran and in the distance, the ruins of a town. Paloma? Zipakna tilted his wrist, called up his position on his link. Yes, that was it. He had wandered a bit farther eastward than he'd thought and had cut through the edge of the Pima preserve. Sure enough, a fine had been levied against his account. He sighed. He serviced the Pima settlement out here and they didn't mind if he trespassed. It merely became a bargaining chip when it came time to talk price. The Pima loved to bargain.

He really should let the nav-link plot his course, but Ilena was right about that, at least. He prided himself on finding his way through the Sonora without it. Zipakna squinted as a flicker of movement caught his eye. A lizard? Maybe. Or one of the tough desert rodents. They didn't need to drink, got their water from seeds and cactus fruit. More adaptable than *Homo sapiens*, he thought, and smiled grimly.

He pulled his binocs from his belt pouch and focused on the movement. The digital lenses seemed to suck him through the air like a thrown spear, gray-ochre blur resolving into stone, mica flash, and yes, the brown and gray shape of a lizard. The creature's head swiveled, throat pulsing, so that it seemed to stare straight into his eyes. Then, in an eyeblink, it vanished. The Dragon chimed its full battery load. Time to go. He stood carefully, a cloud of thirsty killer bees and native wasps buzzing about him, shook free of them and slipped into the coolness of the Dragon's interior. The hens clucked in the rear and the Dragon furled its solar wings and lurched forward, crawling down over the edge of the scarp, down to the plain below and its saguaro sentinels.

His sat-link chimed and his console screen brightened to life. *You are entering unserviced United States territory. The voice was female and severe. No support services will be provided from this point on. Your entry visa does not assure assistance in unserviced regions. Please file all complaints with the US Bureau of Land Management. Please consult with your insurance provider before continuing.* Did he detect a note of disapproval in the sat-link voice? Zipakna grinned without humor and guided the Dragon down the steep slope, its belted treads barely marring the dry surface as he navigated around rock and thorny clumps of mesquite. He was a citizen of the Republic of Mexico and the US's sat eyes would certainly track his chip. They just wouldn't send a rescue if he got into trouble.

Such is life, he thought, and swatted an annoyed killer as it struggled against the windshield.

He passed the first of Paloma's plantings an hour later. The glassy



black disks of the solar collectors glinted in the sun, powering the drip system that fed the scattered clumps of greenery. Short, thick-stalked sunflowers turned their dark faces to the sun, fringed with orange and scarlet petals. Zipakna frowned thoughtfully and videoed one of the wide blooms as the Dragon crawled past. Sure enough, his screen lit up with a similar blossom crossed with a circle-slash of warning.

An illegal pharm crop. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. This was new. He almost turned around, but he liked the folk in Paloma. Good people; misfits, not sociopaths. It was an old settlement and one of his favorites. He sighed, because three diabetics lived here and a new bird flu had come over from Asia. It would find its way here eventually, riding the migration routes. He said a prayer to the old gods and his mother's *Santa Maria* for good measure and crawled on into town.

Nobody was out this time of day. Heat waves shimmered above the black solar panels and a lizard whip-flicked beneath the sagging Country Market's porch. He parked the Dragon in the dusty lot at the end of Main Street where a couple of buildings had burned long ago and unfurled the solar wings again. It took a lot of power to keep them from baking here. In the back Ezzie was clucking imperatively. The oldest of the chickens, she always seemed to know when they were stopping at a settlement. That meant fresh greens. "You're a pig," he said, but he chuckled as he made his way to the back to check on his flock.

The twenty hens clucked and scratched in their individual cubicles, excited at the halt. "I'll let you out soon," he promised and measured laying ration into their feeders. Bella had already laid an egg. He reached into her cubicle and cupped it in his hand, pale pink and smooth, still warm and faintly moist from its passage out of her body. Insulin nano-bodies, designed to block the auto-immune response that destroyed the insulin producing Beta cells in diabetics. He labeled Bella's egg and put it into the egg fridge. She was his highest producer. He scooped extra ration into her feeder.

*Intruder*, his alarm system announced. The heads-up display above the front console lit up. Zipakna glanced at it, brows furrowed, then smiled. He slipped to the door, touched it open. "You could just knock," he said.

The skinny boy hanging from the front of the Dragon by his fingers as he tried to peer through the windscreen let go, missed his footing and landed on his butt in the dust.

"It's too hot out here," Zipakna said. "Come inside. You can see better."

The boy looked up, his face tawny with Sonoran dust, hazel eyes wide with fear.

Zipakna's heart froze and time seemed to stand still. *She* must have looked like this as a kid, he thought. Probably just like this, considering how skinny and androgynous she had been in her twenties. He shook himself. "It's all right," he said and his voice only quivered a little. "You can come in."

"Ella said you have chickens. She said they lay magic eggs. I've never seen a chicken. But Pierre says there's no magic." The fear had vanished from his eyes, replaced now by bright curiosity.

That, too, was like her. Fear had never had a real hold on her.



How many times had he wished it had?

"I do have chickens. You can see them now." He held the door open. "What's your name?"

"Daren." The boy darted past him, quick as one of the desert's lizards, scrambled into the Dragon.

Her father's name.

Zipakna climbed in after him, feeling old suddenly, dry as this ancient desert. *I can't have kids*, she had said, so earnest. *How could I take a child into the uncontrolled areas? How could I leave one behind? Maybe later. After I'm done out there.*

"It's freezing in here." Daren stared around at the control bank under the wide windscreen, his bare arms and legs, skin clay-brown from the sun, ridged with goosebumps.

So much bare skin scared Zipakna. Average age for onset of melanoma without regular boosters was twenty-five. "Want something to drink? You can go look at the chickens. They're in the back."

"Water?" The boy gave him a bright, hopeful look. "Ella has a chicken. She lets me take care of it." He disappeared into the chicken space.

Zipakna opened the egg fridge. Bianca laid steadily even though she didn't have the peak capacity that some of the others did. So he had a good stock of her eggs. The boy was murmuring to the hens who were clucking greetings at him. "You can take one out," Zipakna called back to him. "They like to be held." He opened a packet of freeze-dried chocolate soy milk, reconstituted it, and whipped one of Bianca's eggs into it, so that it frothed tawny and rich. The gods knew if the boy had ever received any immunizations at all. Bianca provided the basic panel of nanobodies against most of the common pathogens and cancers. Including melanoma.

In the chicken room, Daren had taken Bella out of her cage, held her cradled in his arms. The speckled black and white hen clucked contentedly, occasionally pecking Daren's chin lightly. "She likes to be petted," Zipakna said. "If you rub her comb she'll sing to you. I made you a milkshake."

The boy's smile blossomed as Bella gave out with the almost-melodic squawks and creaks that signified her pleasure. "What's a milkshake?" Still smiling, he returned the hen to her cage and eyed the glass.

"Soymilk and chocolate and sugar." He handed it to Daren, found himself holding his breath as the boy tasted it and considered.

"Pretty sweet." He drank some. "I like it anyway."

To Zipakna's relief he drank it all and licked foam from his lip.

"So when did you move here?" Zipakna took the empty glass, rinsed it at the sink.

"Wow, you use water to clean dishes?" The boy's eyes had widened. "We came here last planting time. Pierre brought those seeds." He pointed in the general direction of the sunflower fields.

Zipakna's heart sank. "You and your parents?" He made his voice light.

Daren didn't answer for a moment. "Pierre. My father." He looked back to the chicken room. "If they're not magic, why do you give them water? Ella's chicken warns her about snakes, but you don't have to worry about snakes in here. What good are they?"

The cold logic of the Dry, out here beyond the security net of civilized space. "Their eggs keep you healthy." He watched the boy consider that. "You know Ella, right?" He waited for the boy's nod. "She has a disease that would kill her if she didn't eat an egg from that chicken you were holding every year."

Daren frowned, clearly doubting that. "You mean like a snake egg? They're good, but Ella's chicken doesn't lay eggs. And snake eggs don't make you get better when you're sick."

"They don't. And Ella's chicken is a banty rooster. He doesn't lay eggs." Zipakna looked up as a figure moved on the heads-up. "Bella is special and so are her eggs." He opened the door. "Hello, Ella, what are you doing out here in the heat?"

"I figured he'd be out here bothering you." Ella hoisted herself up the Dragon's steps, her weathered, sun-dried face the color of real leather, her loose sun-shirt falling back from the stringy muscles of her arms as she reached up to kiss Zipakna on the cheek. "You behavin' yourself, boy? I'll switch you if you aren't."

"I'm being good." Daren grinned. "Ask him."

"He is." Zipakna eyed her face and briefly exposed arms, looking for any sign of melanoma. Even with the eggs, you could still get it out here with no UV protection. "So, Ella, you got some new additions to town, eh? New crops, too, I see." He watched her look away, saw her face tighten.

"Now don't you start." She stared at the south viewscreen filled with the bright heads of sunflowers. "Prices on everything we have to buy keep going up. And the Pima are tight, you know that. Plain sunflower oil don't bring much."

"So now you got something that can get you raided. By the government or someone worse."

"You're the one comes out here from the city where you got water and power, go hiking around in the dust with enough stuff to keep raiders fat and happy for a year." Ella's leathery face creased into a smile. "You preachin' risk at me, Zip?"

"Ah, but we know I'm crazy, eh?" He returned her smile, but shook his head. "I hope you're still here, next trip. How're your sugar levels? You been checking?"

"If we ain't we ain't." She lifted one bony shoulder in a shrug. "They're holding. They always do."

"The eggs do make you well?" Daren looked at Ella.

"Yeah, they do." Ella cocked her head at him. "There's magic, even if Pierre don't believe it."

"Do you really come from a city?" Daren was looking up at Zipakna now. "With a dome and water in the taps and everything?"

"Well, I come from Oaxaca, which doesn't have a dome. I spend most of my time in La Paz. It's on the Baja peninsula, if you know where that is."

"I do." He grinned. "Ella's been schooling me. I know where Oaxaca is, too. You're Mexican, right?" He tilted his head. "How come you come up here with your eggs?"

Ella was watching him, her dark eyes sharp with surmise. Nobody had ever asked him that question openly before. It wasn't the kind of question

you asked, out here. Not out loud. He looked down into Daren's hazel eyes, into *her* eyes. "Because nobody else does."

Daren's eyes darkened and he looked down at the floor, frowning slightly. "Sit down, Ella, let me get you your egg. Long as you're here." Zipakna turned quickly to the kitchen wall and filled glasses with water. While they drank, he got Bella's fresh egg from the egg fridge and cracked it into a glass, blending it with the raspberry concentrate that Ella favored and a bit of soy milk.

"That's a milkshake," Daren announced as Zipakna handed Ella the glass. "He made me one, too." He looked up at Zipakna. "I'm not sick."

"He didn't think you were." Ella lifted her glass in a salute. "Because nobody else does." Drank it down. "You gonna come eat with us tonight?" Usually the invitation came with a grin that revealed the gap in her upper front teeth, and a threat about her latest pequin salsa. Today her smile was cautious. Wary. "Daren?" She nodded at the boy. "You go help Maria with the food. You know it's your turn today."

"Aw." He scuffed his bare feet, but headed for the door. "Can I come pet the chickens again?" He looked back hopefully from the door, grinned at Zipakna's nod, and slipped out, letting in a breath of oven-air.

"Ah, Ella." Zipakna sighed and reached into the upper cupboard. "Why did you plant those damn sunflowers?" He pulled out the bottle of aged mescal tucked away behind the freeze-dried staples. He filled a small, thick glass and set it down on the table in front of Ella beside her refilled water glass. "This can be the end of the settlement. You know that."

"The end can come in many ways." She picked up the glass, held it up to the light. "Perhaps fast is better than slow, eh?" She sipped the liquor, closed her eyes and sighed. "Luna and her husband tried for amnesty, applied to get a citizen-visa at the border. They've canceled the amnesty. You live outside the serviced areas, I guess you get to stay out here. I guess the US economy faltered again. No more new citizens from Outside. And you know Mexico's policy about US immigration." She shrugged. "I'm surprised they even let you come up here."

"Oh, my government doesn't mind traffic in this direction. It likes to rub the US's nose in the fact that we send aid to its own citizens," he said lightly. Yeah, the border was closed tight to immigration from the north right now, because the US was being sticky about tariffs. "I can't believe they've made the Interior Boundaries airtight." That was what *she* had been afraid of, all those years ago.

"I guess they have to keep cutting and cutting." Ella drained the glass, probing for the last drops of amber liquor with her tongue. "No, one is enough." She shook her head as he turned to the cupboard. "The folks that live nice want to keep it that way, so you got to cut somewhere. We all know the US is slowly eroding away. It's not a superpower anymore. They just pretend." She looked up at Zipakna, her eyes like flakes of obsidian set into the nested wrinkles of her sun-dried face. "What is your interest in the boy, Zip? He's too young."

He turned away from those obsidian-flake eyes. "You misunderstand."

She waited, didn't say anything.

"Once upon a time there was a woman." He stared at the sun-baked

emptiness of the main street on the vid screen. A tumbleweed skeleton turned slowly, fitfully across dust and cracked asphalt. "She had a promising career in academics, but she preferred field work."

"Field work?"

"She was a botanist. She created some drought-tolerant GMOs and started field testing them. They were designed for the drip irrigation ag areas, but she decided to test them . . . out here. She . . . got caught up in it . . . establishing adaptive GMOs out here to create sustainable harvests. She . . . gave up an academic career. Put everything into this project. Got some funding for it."

Ella sat without speaking as the silence stretched between them. "What happened to her?" She asked it, finally.

"I don't know." The tumbleweed had run up against the pole of a rusted and dented *No Parking* sign and quivered in the hot wind. "I . . . lost contact with her."

Ella nodded, her face creased into thoughtful folds. "I see."

No, you don't, he thought.

"How long ago?"

"Fifteen years."

"So he's not your son."

He flinched even though he'd known the question was coming. "No." He was surprised at how hard it was to speak that word.

Ella levered herself to her feet, leaning hard on the table. Pain in her hip. The osteo-sarcoma antibodies his chickens produced weren't specific to her problem. A personally tailored anti-cancer panel might cure her, but that cost money. A lot of money. He wasn't a doctor, but he'd seen enough osteo out here to measure her progress. It was the water, he guessed. "I brought you a present." He reached up into the cupboard again, brought out a flat plastic bottle of mescal with the Mexico state seal on the cap. Old stuff. Very old.

She took it, her expression enigmatic, tilted it, her eyes on the slosh of pale golden liquor. The she let her breath out in a slow sigh and tucked the bottle carefully beneath her loose shirt. "Thank you." Her obsidian eyes gave nothing away.

He caught a glimpse of rib bones, faint bruising, and dried, shrunken flesh, revised his estimate. "You're welcome."

"I think you need to leave here." She looked past him. "We maybe need to live without your eggs. I'd just go right now."

He didn't answer for a moment. Listened to the chuckle of the hens. "Can I come to dinner tonight?"

"That's right. You're crazy. We both know that." She sighed.

He held the door for her as she lowered herself stiffly and cautiously into the oven heat of the fading day.

She was right, he thought as he watched her limp through the heat shimmer, back to the main building. She was definitely right.

He took his time with the chickens, letting them out of their cages to scratch on the grass carpet and peck at the vitamin crumbles he scattered for them. While he was parked here, they could roam loose in the

back of the Dragon. He kept the door leading back to their section locked and all his hens were good about laying in their own cages, although at this point, he could tell who had laid which egg by sight. By the time he left the Dragon, the sun was completely down and the first pale stars winked in the royal blue of the darkening sky. No moon tonight. The wind had died and he smelled dust and a whiff of roasting meat as his boots grated on the dusty asphalt of the old main street. He touched the small hardness of the stunner in his pocket and climbed the sagging porch of what had once been a store, back when the town had still lived.

They had built a patio of sorts out behind the building, had roofed it from the sun with metal sheeting stripped from other derelict buildings. Long tables and old sofas clustered inside the building, shelter from the sun on the long hot days where residents shelled sunflower seed after harvest or worked on repair jobs or just visited, waiting for the cool of evening. He could see the yellow flicker of flame out back through the old plate-glass windows with their taped cracks.

The moment he entered he felt it—tension like the prickle of static electricity on a dry, windy day. Paloma was easy, friendly. He let his guard down sometimes when he was here, sat around the fire pit out back and shared the mescal he brought, trading swallows with the local stuff, flavored with cactus fruit, that wasn't all that bad, considering.

Tonight, eyes slid his way, slid aside. The hair prickled on the back of his neck, but he made his smile easy. "Hola," he said, and gave them the usual grin and wave. "How you all makin' out?"

"Zip." Ella heaved herself up from one of the sofas, crossed the floor with firm strides, hands out, face turning up to kiss his cheeks. Grim determination folded the skin at the corners of her eyes tight. "Glad you could eat with us. Thanks for that egg today, I feel better already."

Ah, that was the issue? "Got to keep that blood sugar low." He gave her a real hug, because she was so *solid*, was the core of this settlement, whether the others realized it or not.

"Come on." Ella grabbed his arm. "Let's go out back. Rodriguez got an antelope, can you believe it? A young buck, no harm done."

"Meat?" He laughed, made it relaxed and easy, from the belly. "You eat better than I do. It's all vat stuff or too pricey to afford, down south. Good thing maize and beans are in my blood."

"Hey." Daren popped in from the firelit back, his eyes bright in the dim light. "Can my friends come see the chickens?"

*My friends.* The shy, hopeful pride in those words was so naked that Zipakna almost winced. He could see two or three faces behind Daren. That same tone had tainted his own voice, back when he had been a government scholarship kid from the wilds beyond San Cristobal, one of those who spoke Spanish as a second language. *My friends*, such a precious thing when you did not belong.

"Sure." He gave Daren a "we're buddies" grin and shrug. "Any time. You can show 'em around." Daren's eyes betrayed his struggle to look nonchalant.

A low chuckle circulated through the room, almost too soft to be heard, and Ella touched his arm lightly. Approvingly. Zipakna felt the tension re-

lax a bit as he and Ella made their way through the dusk of the building to the firelit dark out back. One by one the shadowy figures who had stood back, not greeted him, thawed and followed. He answered greetings, pretending he hadn't noticed anything, exchanged the usual pleasantries that concerned weather and world politics, avoided the real issues of life. Like illegal crops. One by one, he identified the faces as the warm red glow of the coals in the firepit lit them. She needed the MS egg from Negro, he needed the anti-malaria from Seca and so did she. Daren had appeared at his side, his posture taut, a mix of proprietary and anxious.

"Meat, what a treat, eh?" Zipakna grinned down at Daren as one of the women laid a charred strip of roasted meat on a plate, dumped a scoop of beans beside it and added a flat disk of tortilla, thick and chewy and gritty from the bicycle-powered stone mill that the community used to grind maize into masa.

"Hey, you be careful tomorrow." She nodded toward a plastic bucket filled with water, a dipper and cups beside it. "Don't you let my Jonathan hurt any of those chickens. He's so clumsy."

"I'll show 'em how to be careful." Daren took the piled plate she handed him, practically glowing with pride.

Zipakna smiled at the server. She was another diabetic, like Ella. Sanja. He remembered her name.

"Watch out for the chutney." Sanja grinned and pointed at a table full of condiment dishes. "The sticky red stuff. I told Ella how to make it and she made us all sweat this year with her pequins."

"I like it hot." He smiled for her. "I want to see if it'll make me sweat."

"It will." Daren giggled. "I thought I'd swallowed coals, man." He carried his plate to one of the wooden tables, set it down with a possessive confidence beside Zipakna's.

Usually he sat at a crowded table answering questions, sharing news that hadn't yet filtered out here with the few traders, truckers, or wanderers who risked the unserviced Dry. Not this time. He chewed the charred, overdone meat slowly, aware of the way Daren wolfed his food, how most of the people here ate the same way, always prodded by hunger. That was how they drank, too, urgently, always thirsty.

*Not many of them meant to end up out there.* He remembered her words, the small twin lines that he called her "thinking dimples" creasing her forehead as she stared into her wine glass. *They had plans, they had a future in mind. It wasn't this one.*

"That isn't really why you come out here, is it? What you said before—in your big truck?"

Zipakna started, realized he was staring into space, a forkful of beans poised in the air. He looked down at Daren, into those clear hazel eyes that squeezed his heart. She had always known when he wasn't telling the truth. "No. It isn't." He set the fork down on his plate. "A friend of mine . . . a long time ago . . . went missing out here. I've . . . sort of hoped to run into her." At least that was how it had started. Now he looked for her ghost. Daren was staring at his neck.

"Where did you get that necklace?"

Zipakna touched the carved jade cylinder on its linen cord. "I found it



diving in an old cenote—that's a kind of well where people threw offerings to the gods centuries ago. You're not supposed to dive there, but I was a kid—sneaking in."

"Are the cenotes around here?" Daren looked doubtful. "I never heard of any wells."

"No, they're way down south. Where I come from."

Daren scraped up the last beans from his plate, wiped it carefully with his tortilla. "Why did your friend come out here?"

"To bring people plants that didn't need much water." Zipakna sighed and eyed the remnants of his dinner. "You want this? I'm not real hungry tonight."

Daren gave him another doubting look, then shrugged and dug into the last of the meat and beans. "She was like Pierre?"

"No!"

The boy flinched and Ziapakna softened his tone. "She created food plants so that you didn't need to grow as much to eat well." And then . . . she had simply gotten too involved. He closed his eyes, remembering that bitter bitter fight. "Is your mother here?" He already knew the answer but Daren's head shake still pierced him. The boy focused on wiping up the last molecule of the searing sauce with a scrap of tortilla, shoulders hunched.

"What are you doing?"

At the angry words, Daren's head shot up and he jerked his hands away from the plate as if it had burned him.

"I was just talking with him, Pierre." He looked up, sandy hair falling back from his face. "He doesn't mind."

"I mind." The tall, skinny man with the dark braid and pale skin frowned down at Daren. "What have I told you about city folk?"

"But . . ." Daren bit off the word, ducked his head. "I'll go clean my plate." He snatched his plate and cup from the table, headed for the deeper shadows along the building.

"You leave him alone." The man stared down at him, his gray eyes flat and cold. "We all know about city folk and their appetites."

Suddenly the congenial chatter that had started up during the meal ended. Silence hung thick as smoke in the air. "You satisfied my appetite quite well tonight." Zipakna smiled gently. "I haven't had barbecued antelope in a long time."

"You got to wonder." Pierre leaned one hip against the table, crossed his arms. "Why someone gives up the nice air conditioning and swimming pools of the city to come trekking around out here handing out free stuff. Especially when your rig costs a couple of fortunes."

Zipakna sighed, made it audible. From the corner of his eye he noticed Ella, watching him intently, was aware of the hard lump of the stunner in his pocket. "I get this every time I meet folk. We already went through it here, didn't anyone tell you?"

"Yeah, they did." Pierre gave him a mirthless smile. "And you want me to believe that some non-profit in Mexico—Mexico!—cares about us? Not even our own government does that."

"It's all politics." Zipakna shrugged. "Mexico takes quite a bit of civic



pleasure in the fact that Mexico has to extend aid to US citizens. If the political situation changes, yeah, the money might dry up. But for now, people contribute and I come out here. So do a few others like me." He looked up, met the man's cold, gray eyes. "Haven't you met an altruist at least once in your life?" he asked softly.

Pierre looked away and his face tightened briefly. "I sure don't believe you're one. You leave my son alone." He turned on his heel and disappeared in the direction Daren had taken.

Zipakna drank his water, skin prickling with the feel of the room. He looked up as Ella marched over, sat down beside him. "We know you're what you say you are." She pitched her voice to reach everyone. "Me, I'm looking forward to my egg in the morning, and I sure thank you for keeping an old woman like me alive. Not many care. He's right about that much." She gave Zipakna a small private wink as she squeezed his shoulder and stood up. "Sanja and I'll be there first thing in the morning, right, Sanja?"

"Yeah." Sanja's voice emerged from shadow, a little too bright. "We sure will."

Zipakna got to his feet and Ella rose with him. "You should all come by in the morning. Got a new virus northwest of here. It's high mortality and it's moving this way. Spread by birds, so it'll get here. I have eggs that will give you immunity." He turned and headed around the side of the building.

A thin scatter of replies drifted after him and he found Ella walking beside him, her hand on his arm. "They change everything," she said softly. "The flowers."

"You know, the sat cams can see them." He kept his voice low as they crunched around the side of the building, heading toward the Dragon. "They measure the light refraction from the leaves and they can tell if they're legit or one of the outlaw strains. That's no accident, Ella. You don't realize how much the government and the drug gangs use the same tools. One or the other will get you." He shook his head. "You better hope it's the government."

"They haven't found us yet."

"The seeds aren't ready to harvest, are they?"

"Pierre says we're too isolated."

Zipakna turned on her. "Nowhere is isolated any more. Not on this entire dirt ball. You ever ask Pierre why he showed up here? Why didn't he stay where he was before if he was doing such a good job growing illegal seeds?"

Ella didn't answer and he walked on.

"It's a mistake to let a ghost run your life." Ella's voice came low from the darkness behind him, tinged with sadness.

Zipakna hesitated as the door slid open for him. "Good night, Ella." He climbed into its cool interior, listening to the hens' soft chortle of greeting.

They showed up in the cool of dawn, trickling up to the Dragon in ones and twos to drink the frothy blend of fruit and soymilk he offered and to ask shyly about the news they hadn't asked about last night. A few apologized. Not many.

Neither Daren nor Pierre showed up. Zipakna fed the hens, collected the day's eggs, and was glad he'd given Daren his immunization egg the day before. By noon he had run out of things to keep him here. He hiked over to the community building in the searing heat of noon, found Ella sewing a shirt in the still heat of the interior, told her goodbye.

"Go with God," she told him and her face was as seamed and dry as the land outside.

This settlement would not be here when he next came this way. The old gods wrote that truth in the dust devils dancing at the edge of the field. He wondered what stolen genes those seeds carried. He looked for Daren and Pierre but didn't see either of them. Tired to the bone, he trudged back to the Dragon in the searing heat. Time to move on. Put kilometers between the Dragon and the dangerous magnet of those ripening seeds.

*You have a visitor*, the Dragon announced as he approached.

He hadn't locked the door? Zipakna frowned, because he didn't make that kind of mistake. Glad that he was still carrying the stunner, he slipped to the side and opened the door, fingers curled around the smooth shape of the weapon.

"Ella said you were leaving." Daren stood inside, Bella in his arms.

"Yeah, I need to move on." He climbed up, the wash of adrenalin through his bloodstream telling him just how tense he had been here. "I have other settlements to visit."

Daren looked up at him, frowning a little. Then he turned and went back into the chicken room to put Bella back in her traveling coop. He scratched her comb, smiled a little as she chuckled at him, and closed the door. "I think maybe . . . this is yours." He turned and held out a hand.

Zipakna stared down at the carved jade cylinder on his palm. It had been strung on a fine steel chain. She had worn it on a linen cord with coral beads knotted on either side of it. He swallowed. Shook his head. "It's yours." The words came out husky and rough. "She meant you to have it."

"I thought maybe she was the friend you talked about." Daren closed his fist around the bead. "She said the same thing you did, I remember. She said she came out here because no one else would. Did you give it to her?"

He nodded, squeezing his eyes closed, struggling to swallow the pain that welled up into his throat. "You can come with me," he whispered. "You're her son. Did she tell you she had dual citizenship—for both the US and Mexico? You can get citizenship in Mexico. Your DNA will prove that you're her son."

"I'd have to ask Pierre." Daren looked up at him, his eyes clear, filled with a maturity far greater than his years. "He won't say yes. He doesn't like the cities and he doesn't like Mexico even more."

Zipakna clenched his teeth, holding back the words that he wanted to use to describe Pierre. Lock the door, he thought. Just leave. Make Daren understand as they rolled on to the next settlement. "What happened to her?" he said softly, so softly.

"A border patrol shot her." Daren fixed his eyes on Bella, who was fuss-

ing and clucking in her cage. "A chopper. They were just flying over, shooting coyotes. They shot her and me."

She had a citizen chip. If they'd had their scanner on, they would have picked up the signal. He closed his eyes, his head filled with roaring. Yahoos out messing around, who was ever gonna check up? Who cared? When he opened his eyes, Daren was gone, the door whispering closed behind him.

What did any of it matter? He blinked dry eyes and went forward to make sure the thermosolar plant was powered up. It was. He released the brakes and pulled into a tight turn, heading southward out of town on the old, cracked asphalt of the dead road.

He picked up the radio chatter in the afternoon as he fed the hens and let the unfurled panels recharge the storage batteries. He always listened, had paid a lot of personal money for the top decryption chip every trek. He wanted to know who was talking out here and about what.

US border patrol. He listened with half an ear as he scraped droppings from the crate pans and dumped them into the recycler. He knew the acronyms, you mostly got US patrols out here. *Flower-town*. It came over in a sharp, tenor voice. He straightened, chicken shit spilling from the dustpan in his hand as he listened. Hard.

Paloma. What else could "Flower-town" be out here? They were going to hit it. Zipakna stared down at the scattered gray and white turds on the floor. Stiffly, slowly, he knelt and brushed them into the dust pan. This was the only outcome. He knew it. Ella knew it. They'd made the choice. *Not many of them meant to end up out there*. Her voice murmured in his ear, so damn earnest. *They had plans, they had a future in mind. It wasn't this one*.

"Shut up!" He bolted to his feet, flung the pan at the wall. "Why did you have his kid?" The pan hit the wall and shit scattered everywhere. The hens panicked, squawking and beating at the mesh of their crates. Zipakna dropped to his knees, heels of his hands digging into his eyes until red light webbed his vision.

*Flower-town*. It came in over the radio, thin and wispy now, like a ghost voice.

Zipakna stumbled to his feet, went forward and furled the solar panels. Powered up and did a tight one-eighty that made the hens squawk all over again.

The sun sank over the rim of the world, streaking the ochre ground with long, dark shadows that pointed like accusing fingers. He saw the smoke in the last glow of the day, mushrooming up in a black flag of doom. He switched the Dragon to infrared navigation, and the black and gray images popped up on the heads-up above the console. He was close. He slowed his speed, wiped sweating palms on his shirt. They'd have a perimeter alarm set and they'd pick him up any minute now. If they could claim he was attacking them, they'd blow him into dust in a heartbeat. He'd run into US government patrols out here before and they didn't like the Mexican presence one bit. But his movements were sat-recorded and

recoverable and Mexico would love to accuse the US of firing on one of its charity missions in the world media. So he was safe. If he was careful. He slowed the Dragon even more although he wanted to race. Not that there would be much he could do.

He saw the flames first and the screen darkened as the nightvision program filtered the glare. The community building? More flames sprang to life in the sunflower fields.

*Attention Mexican registry vehicle N45YG90. The crudely accented Spanish filled the Dragon. You are entering an interdicted area. Police action is in progress and no entry is permitted.*

Zipakna activated his automatic reply. "I'm sorry. I will stop here. I have a faulty storage bank and I'm almost out of power. I won't be able to go any farther until I can use my panels in the morning." He sweated in the silence, the hens clucking softly in the rear.

*Stay in your vehicle. The voice betrayed no emotion. Any activity will be viewed as a hostile act. Understand?*

"Of course." Zipakna broke the connection. The air in the Dragon seemed syrupy thick, pressing against his ear drums. They could be scanning him, watching to make sure that he didn't leave the Dragon. All they needed was an excuse. He heard a flurry of sharp reports. Gunshots. He looked up at the screen, saw three quick flashes of light erupt from the building beyond the burning community center. No, they'd be looking there. Not here.

Numbly he stood and pulled his protective vest from its storage cubicle along with a pair of night goggles. He put the Dragon on standby. Just in case. If he didn't reactivate it in forty-eight hours, it would send a may-day back to headquarters. They'd come and collect the hens and the Dragon. He looked once around the small, dimly lit space of the Dragon, said a prayer to the old gods and touched the jade at his throat. Then he touched the door open, letting in a dry breath of desert that smelled of bitter smoke, and slipped out into the darkness.

He crouched, moving with the fits and starts of the desert coyotes, praying again to the old gods that the patrol wasn't really worrying about him. Enough clumps of mesquite survived here in this long ago wash to give him some visual cover from anyone looking in his direction and as he remembered, the wash curved north and east around the far end of the old town. It would take him close to the outermost buildings.

It seemed to take a hundred years to reach the tumbledown shack that marked the edge of the town. He slipped into its deeper shadow. A half moon had risen and his goggles made the landscape stand out in bright black and gray and white. The gunfire had stopped. He slipped from the shed to the fallen ruins of an old house, to the back of an empty storefront across from the community building. It was fully in flames now and his goggles damped the light as he peered cautiously from the glassless front window. Figures moved in the street, dressed in military coveralls. They had herded a dozen people together at the end of the street and Zipakna saw the squat, boxy shapes of two big military choppers beyond them.

They would not have a good future, would become permanent residents of a secure resettlement camp somewhere. He touched his goggles, his

stomach lurching as he zoomed in on the bedraggled settlers. He recognized Sanja, didn't see either Ella or Daren, but he couldn't make out too many faces in the huddle. If the patrol had them, there was nothing he could do. They were searching the buildings on this side of the street. He saw helmeted figures cross the street, heading for the building next to his vantage point.

Zipakna slipped out the back door, made his way to the next building, leaned through the sagging window opening. "Daren? Ella? It's Zip," he said softly. "Anyone there?" Silence. He didn't dare raise his voice, moved on to the next building, his skin tight, expecting a shouted command. If they caught him interfering they'd arrest him. It might be a long time before Mexico got him freed. His bosses would be very unhappy with him.

"Ella?" He hurried, scrabbling low through fallen siding, tangles of old junk. They weren't here. The patrol must have made a clean sweep. He felt a brief, bitter stab of satisfaction that they had at least caught Pierre. One would deserve his fate, anyway.

Time to get back to the Dragon. As he turned, he saw two shadows slip into the building he had just checked—one tall, one child short. Hope leaped in his chest, nearly choking him. He bent low and sprinted, trying to gauge the time . . . how long before the patrol soldiers got to this building? He reached a side window, its frame buckled. As he did, a slight figure scrambled over the broken sill and even in the black and white of nightvision, Zipakna recognized Daren's fair hair.

The old gods had heard him. He grabbed the boy, hand going over his mouth in time to stifle his cry. "It's me. Zip. Be silent," he hissed.

Light flared in the building Daren had just left. Zipakna's goggles filtered it and crouching in the dark, clutching Daren, he saw Pierre stand up straight, hands going into the air. "All right, I give up. You got me." Two uniformed patrol pointed stunners at Pierre.

Daren's whimper was almost but not quite soundless. "Don't move," Zipakna breathed. If they hadn't seen Daren . . .

"You're the one who brought the seeds." The taller of the two lowered his stunner and pulled an automatic from a black holster on his hip. "We got an ID on you."

A gun? Zipakna stared at it as it rose in seeming slow motion, the muzzle tracking upward to Pierre's stunned face. Daren lunged in his grip and he yanked the boy down and back, hurling him to the ground. The stunner seemed to have leaped from his pocket to his hand and the tiny dart hit the man with the gun smack in the center of his chest. A projectile vest didn't stop a stunner charge. The man's arms spasmed outward and the ugly automatic went sailing, clattering to the floor. Pierre dived for the window as the other patrol yanked out his own weapon and pointed it at Zipakna. He fired a second stun charge but as he did, something slammed into his shoulder and threw him backward. Distantly he heard a loud noise, then Daren was trying to drag him to his feet.

"Let's go." Pierre yanked him upright.

"This way." Zipakna pointed to the distant bulk of the Dragon.

They ran. His left side was numb but there was no time to think about

that. Daren and Pierre didn't have goggles so they ran behind him. He took them through the mesquite, ignoring the thorn slash, praying that the patrol focused on the building first before they started scanning the desert. His back twitched with the expectation of a bullet.

The Dragon opened to him and he herded them in, gasping for breath now, the numbness draining away, leaving slow, spreading pain in its wake. "In here." He touched the hidden panel and it opened, revealing the coffin-shaped space beneath the floor. The Dragon was defended, but this was always the backup. Not even a scan could pick up someone hidden here. "You'll have to both fit. There's air." They managed it, Pierre clasp-ing Daren close, the boy's face buried against his shoulder. Pierre looked up as the panel slid closed. "Thanks." The panel clicked into place.

Zipakna stripped off his protective vest. Blood soaked his shirt. They were using piercers. That really bothered him, but fortunately the vest had slowed the bullet enough. He slapped a blood-stop patch onto the injury, waves of pain washing through his head, making him dizzy. Did a stim-tab from the med closet and instantly straightened, pain and dizziness blasted away by the drug. Didn't dare hide the bloody shirt, so he pulled a loose woven shirt over his head. *Visitor*, the Dragon announced. *US Security ID verified.*

"Open." Zipakna leaned a hip against the console, aware of the heads-up that still showed the town. The building had collapsed into a pile of glowing embers and dark figures darted through the shadows. "Come in." He said it in English with a careful US accent. "You're really having quite a night over there." He stood back as two uniformed patrol burst into the Dragon while a third watched warily from the doorway. All carrying stunners.

Not guns, so maybe, just maybe, they hadn't been spotted.

"What are you up to?" The patrol in charge, a woman, stared at him coldly through the helmet shield. "Did you leave this vehicle or let anyone in?"

The gods had come through. Maybe. "Goodness, no." He arched his eyebrows. "I'm not that crazy. I'm still stunned that Paloma went to raising pharm." He didn't have to fake the bitterness. "That's why you're burning the fields, right? They're a good bunch of people. I didn't think they'd ever give in to that."

Maybe she heard the truth in his words, but for whatever reason, the leader relaxed a hair. "Mind if we look around?" It wasn't a question and he shrugged, stifling a wince at the pain that made it through the stimulant buzz.

"Sure. Don't scare the hens, okay?"

The two inside the Dragon searched, quickly and thoroughly. They checked to see if he had been recording video and Zipakna said thanks to the old gods that he hadn't activated it. That would have changed things, he was willing to bet.

"You need help with your battery problem?" The cold faced woman—a lieutenant, he noticed her insignia—asked him.

He shook his head. "I'm getting by fine as long as I don't travel at night. They store enough for life support."



"I'd get out of here as soon as the sun is up." She jerked her head at the other two. "Any time you got illegal flowers you get raiders. You don't want to mess with them."

"Yes, ma'am." He ducked his head. "I sure will do that." He didn't move as they left, waited a half hour longer just to be sure that they didn't pop back in. But they did not. Apparently they believed his story, hadn't seen their wild dash through the mesquite. He set the perimeter alert to maximum and opened the secret panel. Daren scrambled out first, his face pale enough that his freckles stood out like bits of copper on his skin.

Her freckles.

Zipakna sat down fast. When the stim ran out, you crashed hard. The room tilted, steadied.

"That guy shot you." Daren's eyes seemed to be all pupil. "Are you going to die?"

"You got medical stuff?" Pierre's face swam into view. "Tell me quick, okay?"

"The cupboard to the left of the console." The words came out thick. Daren was staring at his chest. Zipakna looked down. Red was soaking into the ivory weave of the shirt he'd put on. So much for the blood-stop. The bullet must have gone deeper than he thought, or had hit a small artery. Good thing his boarders hadn't stuck around longer.

Pierre had the med kit. Zipakna started to pull the shirt off over his head and the pain hit him like a lightning strike, sheeting his vision with white. He saw the pale green arch of the ceiling, thought *I'm falling* . . .

He woke in his bed, groping drowsily for where he was headed and what he had drunk that made his head hurt this bad. Blinked as a face swam into view. Daren. He pushed himself up to a sitting position, his head splitting.

"You passed out." Daren's eyes were opaque. "Pierre took the bullet out of your shoulder while you were out. You bled a lot but he said you won't die."

"Where's Pierre?" He swung his legs over the side of the narrow bed, fighting dizziness. "How long have I been out?"

"Not very long." Daren backed away. "The chickens are okay. I looked."

"Thanks." Zipakna made it to his feet, steadied himself with a hand on the wall. A quick check of the console said that Pierre hadn't messed with anything. It was light out. Early morning. He set the video to sweep, scanned the landscape. No choppers, no trace of last night's raiders. He watched the images pan across the heads-up; blackened fields, the smoldering pile of embers and twisted plumbing that had been the community center, still wisping smoke. The fire had spread to a couple of derelict buildings to the windward of the old store. Movement snagged his eye. Pierre. Digging. He slapped the control, shut off the vid. Daren was back with the chickens. "Stay here, okay? I'm afraid to leave them alone."

"Okay." Daren's voice came to him, hollow as an empty eggshell.

He stepped out into the oven heat, his head throbbing in time to his footsteps as he crossed the sunbaked ground to the empty bones of Palo-



ma. A red bandanna had snagged on a mesquite branch, flapping in the morning's hot wind. He saw a woman's sandal lying on the dusty asphalt of the main street, a faded red backpack. He picked it up, looked inside. Empty. He dropped it, crossed the street, angling northward to where he had seen Pierre digging.

He had just about finished two graves. A man lay beside one. The blood that soaked his chest had turned dark in the morning heat. Zipakna recognized his grizzled red beard and thinning hair, couldn't remember his name. He didn't eat any of the special eggs, just the ones against whatever new bug was out there. Pierre climbed out of the shallow grave.

"You shouldn't be walking around." He pushed dirty hair out of his eyes.

Without a word, Zipakna moved to the man's ankles. Pierre shrugged, took the man's shoulders. He was stiff, his flesh plastic and too cold, never mind the morning heat. Without a word they lifted and swung together, lowered him into the fresh grave. It probably wouldn't keep the coyotes out, Zipakna thought. But it would slow them down. He straightened, stepped over to the other grave.

Ella. Her face looked sad, eyes closed. He didn't see any blood, wondered if she had simply suffered a heart attack, if she had had enough as everything she had worked to keep intact burned around her. "Did Daren see her die?" He said it softly. Felt rather than saw Pierre's flinch.

"I don't know. I don't think so." He stuck the shovel into the piled rocks and dirt, tossed the first shovelful into the hole.

Zipakna said the right words in rhythm to the grating thrust of the shovel. First the Catholic prayer his mother would have wanted him to say, then the words for the old gods. Then a small, hard prayer for the new gods who had no language except dust and thirst and the ebb and flow of world politics that swept human beings from the chess board of the earth like pawns.

"You could have let them shoot me." Pierre tossed a last shovelful of dirt onto Ella's grave. "Why didn't you?"

Zipakna tilted his gaze to the hard blue sky. "Daren." Three tiny black specks hung overhead. Vultures. Death called them. "I'll make you a trade. I'll capitalize you to set up as a trader out here. You leave the pharm crops alone. I take Daren with me and get him Mexican citizenship. Give him a future better than yours."

"You can't." Pierre's voice was low and bitter. "I tried. Even though his mother was a US citizen, they're not taking in offspring born out here. Mexico has a fifteen year waiting list for new immigrants." He was star-

## ***MOVING?***

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ing down at the mounded rock and dust of Ella's grave. "She was so angry when she got pregnant. The implant was faulty, I guess. She meant to go back to the city before he was born but . . . I got hurt. And she stuck around." He was silent for awhile. "Then it was too late, Daren was born and the US had closed the border. We're officially out here because we want to be." His lips twisted.

"Why did you come out here?"

He looked up. Blinked. "My parents lived out here. They were the rugged individual types, I guess." He shrugged. "I went into the city, got a job, and they were still letting people come and go then. I didn't like it, all the people, all the restrictions. So I came back out here." He gave a thin laugh. "I was a trader to start with. I got hit by a bunch of raiders. That's when . . . I got hurt. Badly. I'm sorry." He turned away. "I wish you could get him citizenship. He didn't choose this."

"I can." Zipakna watched Pierre halt without turning. "She . . . was my wife. We married in Oaxaca." The words were so damn hard to say. "That gave her automatic dual citizenship. In Mexico, only the mother's DNA is required as proof of citizenship. We're pragmatists," he said bitterly.

For a time, Pierre said nothing. Finally he turned, his face as empty as the landscape. "You're the one." He looked past Zipakna, toward the Dragon. "I don't like you, you know. But I think . . . you'll be a good father for Daren. Better than I've been." He looked down at the dirty steel of the shovel blade. "It's a deal. A trade. I'll sell you my kid. Because it's a good deal for him." He walked past Zipakna toward the Dragon, tossed the shovel into the narrow strip of shade along one of the remaining buildings. The clang and rattle as it hit sounded loud as mountain thunder in the quiet of the windless heat.

Zipakna followed slowly, his shoulder hurting. Ilena would be pissed, would never believe that Daren wasn't his. His mouth crooked with the irony of that. The old gods twisted time and lives into the intricate knots of the universe and you could meet yourself coming around any corner. As the Dragon's doorway opened with a breath of cool air, he heard Pierre's voice from the chicken room, low and intense against the cluck and chortle of the hens, heard Daren's answer, heard the brightness in it.

Zipakna went forward to the console to ready the Dragon for travel. As soon as they reached the serviced lands again he'd transfer his savings to a cash card for Pierre. Pierre could buy what he needed on the Pima's land. They didn't care if you were a Drylander or not.

Ilena would be doubly pissed. But he was a good poker partner and she wouldn't dump him. And she'd like Daren. Once she got past her jealousy. Ilena had always wanted a kid, just never wanted to take the time to *have* one.

He wondered if she had meant to contact him, tell him about Daren, bring the boy back to Mexico. She would have known, surely, that it would have been all right.

Surely. He sighed and furled the solar wings.

Maybe he would keep coming out here. If Daren wanted to. Maybe her ghost would find them as they traveled through this place she had loved. And then he could ask her. ○

Edward Lerner's novels include *Probe*, *Moonstruck*, and (in collaboration with Larry Niven) *Fleet of Worlds*. His short fiction has appeared in *Analog*, *Artemis*, and *Jim Baen's Universe* magazines, on *Amazon Shorts*, in the anthologies *Year's Best SF 7* and *Future Washington*, and in his 2006 collection *Creative Destruction*. He tells us that in the pipeline are the novels *Fools' Experiments*, *Small Miracles*, and (with Larry Niven) *Juggler of Worlds*. In his first story for *Asimov's*, the author looks at the complicated and strange goings-on . . .

# INSIDE THE BOX

Edward M. Lerner

The lecture hall was pleasantly warm. Behind Thaddeus Fitch, busily writing on the chalkboard, pencils scratched earnestly in spiral notebooks, fluorescent lights hummed, and feet shuffled. A Beach Boys tune wafted in through open windows from the quad.

Or so, in any case, the professor imagined the lecture hall. Chattering, muttering students squirming in their seats this morning drowned out the customary sounds. Or what he thought he remembered to be the customary sounds . . .

Chalk squeaked as Thaddeus, with more energy than artistry, began sketching a stick-figure quadruped. "I'll explain this cat momentarily, class." Schrödinger's thought-experiment cat. Today's Introduction to Physics lecture introduced the counterintuitive topic of quantum mechanics. "Recall from your reading that the behavior of atoms and their constituent parts cannot be fully described by such conventional characteristics as position and momentum. More precisely, how we think about those descriptive terms must change." He continued drawing as he spoke, the cube in which he was attempting to enclose the cat somewhat out of perspective. He winced as the chalk snapped, its tip caught by the hole that should not be there. Should it?

"In classical physics, we can, with sufficient care and expense, measure to arbitrary precision the position and momentum of any particle. At sufficiently tiny scales, however, nature does not behave as we expect. Instead, in those infinitesimal domains, we discover that certain parame-

ters exhibit heretofore imperceptible granularity or lumpiness—what physicists call quantization. Further, we cannot measure at quantum scales without influencing whatever is being measured. The math is inappropriate for”—beyond—“this class, but a consequence of quantization is that we cannot have absolute knowledge of subatomic particles.”

His crude diagram complete, Thaddeus pivoted to face the packed auditorium. “If we know an electron’s position quite exactly, we can know little about its momentum. If we know its momentum, we can tell little about where it is. We are reduced to probabilistic descriptions of where the particle may be, and where it may be going.” Doggedly, he ignored the arm waving from the second tier of seats. “But can this uncertainty manifest itself in the macroscopic world *we* experience? That is what Erwin Schrödinger set out to consider. . . .”

“Professor.” Young Mr. McDowell’s tone, although respectful, was quite insistent. The sophomore stood to emphasize his seriousness. “We—the class, that is—we feel we should discuss yesterday’s events.”

A flood of . . . memories? . . . displaced whatever the student said next. A near-miss handgun attack. A flung knife by chance impaling a pigeon inopportunistly availing itself of the open window. A hurtling hand grenade vanished in mid-arc.

Thaddeus shook himself by the mental lapels. *Nonsense*. Pointing at the board, he continued. “Returning to today’s subject, Dr. Schrödinger devised a thought experiment to illustrate quantum uncertainty. My cartoon reveals the inside of the box, but imagine that its walls are quite opaque, quite impenetrable.” Beside the stick-figure cat, he drew a tiny square. “This mechanism contains a bit of radioactive material. Detection of a single radioactive decay,” and he tapped the board once with his chalk stump, “releases poisonous gas.”

He was explaining a decay event as a particle’s spontaneous emission from an atomic nucleus—a manifestation of positional uncertainty—when murmurs of protestation stopped him. Hairs rose on the nape of his neck. In the otherwise jammed hall, one cluster of seats remained unoccupied. It was where *something* had happened.

Only it couldn’t have.

Mr. McDowell was still, or once again, on his feet. He followed Thaddeus’ gaze to the empty few chairs. “We don’t understand about him either, sir. The . . . intruder.”

Heads nodded. Voices rang out in agreement. A hundred pairs of eyes beseeched Thaddeus. He relented. “My unborn grandson, you mean. It’s impossible, you know.”

“But professor . . .”

With outstretched arm and firm voice, Thaddeus interrupted. “You know what you saw, you were going to insist. What you, and your colleagues in later sections of the class, all saw. Or what, rather, you’ve now *convinced* yourselves you saw, after repeated retellings of the tale.” He lowered his arm and voice. “Surely there is a simpler explanation than the impossible.

“A time-travel lecture, illustrated with the grandfather paradox, in a hot, stuffy classroom. A passing car backfires. A guest audits the lecture, someone with red hair like mine. Thrill-seeking students attend later sections of the lecture, and their rumor-fed expectations stoke our own fevered imaginations.”

Thaddeus took a deep breath. "What I, too, admit to remembering did not happen. It *cannot* have happened. This can only have been an instance of mass hysteria."

"Like UFO sightings," someone called out.

"Or the Salem witch trials," Thaddeus agreed. Better a moment of soft-headed gullibility than to deny causality. Not that he cared for either of his options . . .

Young McDowell persisted. "Professor, the blackboard has a *bullet hole*. And how do you explain that the attacks stopped? They ended—you ended them—when you announced you would never have children."

Thaddeus braced himself against his lectern. "A hole was surely in the board all along, unnoticed until the suggestive backfire. And our visitor likely vanished by no more mysterious a means than," and he gestured to the rear of the auditorium, "that rear exit door." Still, his memory insisted his doppelgänger had disappeared—to the future?—from beneath a pile-up of angry students. "Would *you* choose to re-experience our welcome?"

That drew nervous giggles.

"Ladies and gentlemen, yesterday we spoke about cause and effect. Now you claim that my grandson traveled through time to kill me, and that I defeated his attack by my declaration I would have no children.

"If so, no grandson ever traveled back to cause my decision. Will I still make that decision? Might I now *have* children?" Doubts blossomed on their faces, and he hammered the figurative nail into the metaphorical coffin. "How, if I halted the attacks by deciding never to have children, can *you* remember my grandson?"

Whispering stopped as Thaddeus rapped the oaken lectern. "Back to Schrödinger's cat. Has an electron, its exact position uncertain, chanced to manifest itself outside an atomic nucleus? That is, has a radioactive decay occurred to cause release of the poisonous gas? Remember, we cannot see inside the box. Class?"

Confusion returned, but of a more academic nature than the controversy just concluded. (Concluded, mocked some corner of Thaddeus' thoughts, or simply set aside?)

"A show of hands, please. Who thinks the cat is alive?" A few hands rose tentatively. "And who thinks the cat is dead?" More hands. "Not everyone expressed an opinion. Do the rest of you imagine it's a vampire cat—the undead?"

The chuckle was overlong and overloud. He wasn't the only one still on edge. "In the closed system of the sealed box, we cannot know the cat's status. Neither living nor dead *is* the correct answer—at least by the formalism of quantum mechanics. There is only probability until the box is opened and an outcome observed. Until then, all possible outcomes are said by physicists to be in superposition."

A familiar arm wagged. Thaddeus managed not to sigh. "Yes, Mr. McDowell."

"But what does it *mean*?"

"The math of quantum mechanics is crisp, beautiful, and wonderfully predictive. What is not clear," what not even Albert Einstein could discern, "is the physical meaning of that mathematical formalism. Some argue that to ask the question is impermissible. Some assert that the realm of quantum mechanics is so removed from our senses we're unequipped

to judge." That, of course, was why Schrödinger devised the cat in the box. A cat is not a subatomic particle. . . .

Why did his mind keep wandering?

"There are several interpretations, all unprovable, of the mathematical formalism. Living or dead: To have but one outcome when the box is opened is unaesthetically asymmetric. Hence, one theory has it that both outcomes occur—which implies the spawning of another universe. More generally, whenever an uncertainty at the quantum level must resolve itself into a particular result, *the* universe itself must split into *many*, one to instantiate each possible outcome. If we, the occupants of one universe, unseal the box to let loose a live cat, in another universe, the occupants must encounter a dead feline."

More murmuring. This time Thaddeus let bewilderment run its course. As young minds grappled with countless myriads of branching universes newborn each moment, into Thaddeus' own churning mind popped the vision of two commingled universes. Of two possible professors in superposition. From what source might free will arise, except for quantum uncertainty?

Children or not? Memories or hallucination? A bullet hole or just a hole?

Clanging yanked his attention back to the lecture hall. An unseasonably warm autumn day and an alarm: almost surely a fire drill. "Attention, everyone! Leave in an orderly fashion. Assemble on the quad." Thaddeus watched the students stand, form lines, file efficiently from the room, his eyes sweeping from exit to exit to exit. His thoughts remained in turmoil.

"Mr. McDowell!" The lad was at the blackboard. Had he likewise concluded this must be a fire drill? "Cease your foolishness and go now." Thaddeus' eyes resumed their sweep. When his gaze next touched the front of the auditorium, the area was empty. A hastily scrawled phrase had appeared below Schrödinger's cat. He squinted to read it.

Now what had he been thinking about?

The students filtered back from the sunny quad into the hall. A few glanced unsubtly at the wall clock. The hour was almost up. He could have dismissed them straight from the quad, instead of squeezing in a final few minutes of lecture.

"A pleasant day for a fire drill." Thaddeus picked up a piece of chalk. "Where were we?"

Tittering erupted as he looked to the flawless blackboard. His face, thankfully hidden from the class, reddened. "Quite clever." He briskly erased the scribbled graffiti that had appeared beneath his crudely drawn sketch of Schrödinger's cat. The chuckling grew. "Very clever, indeed."

He wished he *had* dismissed them from the quad. A minute later the bell rang, ending the session. Grinning students in twos and threes bustled from the hall.

His humble drawing followed the student witticism into oblivion. Not that it mattered; the caption had been memorable enough. Straightening a sheaf of lecture notes, Thaddeus wondered whether even Einstein would have agreed.

"The *cat* knows." ○



# THE LAST AMERICAN

John Kessel

John Kessel co-directs the creative writing program at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. His fiction has received the Nebula Award, the Theodore Sturgeon Award, the Locus Poll Award, and his October/November 2002 *Asimov's* novella, "Stories for Men," was the winner of the James Tiptree Jr. Award. Another *Asimov's* story, "A Clean Escape" (May 1985), was the first episode of last summer's ABC television series *Masters of Science Fiction*. John's books include *Good News from Outer Space*, *Corrupting Dr. Nice*, and *The Pure Product*. Most recently, with James Patrick Kelly, he edited the anthologies *Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology* and *Rewired: The Post-Cyberpunk Anthology*. His next short story collection, *The Baum Plan for Financial Independence* will be out soon from Small Beers Press. The author's latest story for us takes a grim and brutal look at a master manipulator.

A word of warning: there are scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some readers.

*The Life of Andrew Steele*  
Recreated by Fiona 13  
Reviewed by The OldGuy

*"I don't blame my father for beating me. I don't blame him for tearing the book I was reading from my hands, and I don't blame him for locking me in the basement. When I was a child, I did blame him. I was an-*

*gry, and I hated my father. But as I grew older I came to understand that he did what was right for me, and now I look upon him with respect and love, the respect and love he always deserved, but that I was unable to give him because I was too young and self-centered to grasp it."*

—Andrew Steele, 2077

Conversation with Hagiographer

**D**uring the thirty-three years Andrew Steele occupied the Oval Office of what was then called the White House, in what was then called the United States of America (not to be confused with the current United State of Americans), on the corner of his desk he kept an antiquated device of the early twenty-first century called a taser. Typically used by law enforcement officers, it functioned by shooting out a thin wire that, once in contact with its target, delivered an electric shock of up to three hundred thousand volts. The victim was immediately incapacitated by muscle spasms and intense pain. This crude weapon was used for crowd control or to subdue suspects of crimes.

When Ambassador for the New Humanity Mona Vaidyanathan first visited Steele, she asked what the queer black object was. Steele told her that it had been the most frequent means of communication between his father and himself. "When I was ten years old," he told her, "within a single month my father used that on me sixteen times."

"That's horrible," she said.

"Not for a person with a moral imagination," Steele replied.

In this new biography of Steele, Fiona 13, the Grand Lady of Reproductions, presents the crowning achievement of her long career recreating lives for the Cognosphere. Andrew Steele, when he died in 2100, had come to exemplify the twenty-first century, and his people, in a way that goes beyond the metaphorical. Drawing on every resource of the posthuman biographer, from heuristic modeling to reconstructive DNA sampling to forensic dreaming, Ms. 13 has produced this labor of, if not love, then obsession, and I, for one, am grateful for it.

Fiona presents her new work in a hybrid form. Comparatively little of this biography is subjectively rendered. Instead, harking back to a bygone era, Fiona breaks up the narrative with long passages of *text*—strings of printed code that must be read with the eyes. Of course this adds the burden of learning the code to anyone seeking to experience her recreation, but an accelerated prefrontal intervention is packaged with the biography. Fiona maintains that *text*, since it forces an artificial linearity on experience, stimulates portions of the left brain that seldom function in conventional experiential biographies. The result is that the person undergoing the life of Andrew Steele both lives through significant moments in Steele's subjectivity, and is drawn out of the stream of sensory and emotional reaction to contemplate the significance of that experience from the point of view of a wise commentator.

I trust I do not have to explain the charms of this form to those of you reading this review, but I recommend the experience to all cognizant entities who still maintain elements of curiosity in their affect repertoire.

## CHILDHOOD

**A**ppropriately for a man who was to so personify the twenty-first century, Dwight Andrew Steele was born on January 1, 2001. His mother, Rosamund Sanchez Steele, originally from Mexico, was a lab technician at the forestry school at North Carolina State University; his father, Herbert Matthew Steele, was a land developer and on the board of the Planter's Bank and Trust. Both of Steele's parents were devout Baptists and attended one of the new "big box" churches that had sprung up in the late twentieth in response to growing millennialist beliefs in the United States and elsewhere.

The young Steele was "home schooled." This meant that Steele's mother devoted a portion of every day to teaching her son herself. The public school system was distrusted by large numbers of religious believers, who considered education by the state to be a form of indoctrination in moral error. Home schoolers operated from the premise that the less contact their children had with the larger world, the better.

Unfortunately, in the case of Andrew this did not prevent him from meeting other children. Andrew was a small, serious boy, sensitive, and an easy target for bullies. This led to his first murder. Fiona 13 realizes this event for us through extrapolative genetic mapping.

*We are in the playground, on a bright May morning. We are running across the crowded asphalt toward a climbing structure of wood and metal, when suddenly we are falling! A nine-year-old boy named Jason Terry has tripped us and, when we regain our feet, he tries to pull our pants down. We feel the sting of our elbows where they scraped the pavement; feel surprise and dismay, fear, anger. As Terry leans forward to grab the waistband of our trousers, we suddenly bring our knee up into Terry's face. Terry falls back, sits down awkwardly. The other children gathered laugh. The sound of the laughter in our ears only enrages us more—are they laughing at us? The look of dismay turns to rage on Terry's face. He is going to beat us up, now, he is a deadly threat. We step forward, and before Terry can stand, kick him full in the face. Terry's head snaps back and strikes the asphalt, and he is still.*

*The children gasp. A trickle of blood flows from beneath Terry's ear. From across the playground comes the monitor's voice: "Andrew? Andrew Steele?"*

I have never experienced a more vivid moment in biography. There it all is: the complete assumption by Steele that he is the victim. The fear and rage. The horror, quickly repressed. The later remorse, swamped by desperate justifications.

It was only through his father's political connections and acquiescence in private counseling (that the Steeles did not believe in, taking psychology as a particularly pernicious form of modern mumbo jumbo) that Andrew was kept out of the legal system. He withdrew into the family, his father's discipline, and his mother's teaching.

More trouble was to follow. Keeping it secret from his family, Herbert Steele had invested heavily in real estate in the late oughts; he had leveraged properties he purchased to borrow money to invest in several hedge funds, hoping to put the family into a position of such fundamental wealth that they would be beyond the reach of economic vagaries.

When the Friends of the American League set off the Atlanta nuclear blast in 2012, pushing the first domino of the Global Economic Meltdown, Steele senior's financial house of cards collapsed. The U.S. government, having spent itself into bankruptcy and dependence on Asian debt support through ill-advised imperial schemes and paranoid reactions to global terrorist threats, had no resources to deal with the collapse of private finances. Herbert Steele struggled to deal with the reversal, fell into a depression, and died when he crashed a borrowed private plane into a golf course in Southern Pines.

Andrew was twelve years old. His mother, finding part time work as a data entry clerk, made barely enough money to keep them alive. Andrew was forced into the public schools. He did surprisingly well there. Andrew always seemed mature for his years, deferential to his elders, responsible, trustworthy, and able to see others' viewpoint. He was slightly aloof from his classmates, and seemed more at home in the presence of adults.

Unknown to his overstressed mother, Andrew was living a secret life. On the Internet, under a half dozen false IP addresses, he maintained political websites. Through them he became one of the world's most influential "bloggers."

A blog was a personal web log, a site on the worldwide computer system where individuals, either anonymously or in their own names, commented on current affairs or their own lives. Some of these weblogs had become prominent, and their organizers and authors politically important.

Andrew had a fiction writer's gift for inventing consistent personalities, investing them with brilliant argument and sharp observation. On the "Political Theater" weblog, as Sacré True, he argued for the impeachment of President Harrison; on "Reason Season," as Tom Pain, he demonstrated why Harrison's impeachment would prove disastrous. Fiona sees this phase of Steele's life as his education in manipulating others' sensibilities. His emotion-laden arguments were astonishingly successful at twisting his interlocutors into rhetorical knots. To unravel and respond to one of Steele's arguments rationally would take four times his space, and carry none of his propagandistic force. Steele's argument against the designated hitter rule even found its way into the platform of the resurgent Republican Party.

### INTERROGATOR

*"You don't know why I acted, but I know why. I acted because it is necessary for me to act, because that's what, whether you like it or not, you require me to do. And I don't mind doing it because it's what I have to do. It's what I was born to do. I've never been appreciated for it but that's okay too because, frankly, no one is ever appreciated for what they do.*

*"But before you presume to judge me realize that you are responsible. I am simply your instrument. I took on the burden of your desires when I didn't want to—I would just as gladly have had that cup pass me by—but I did it, and I have never complained. And I have never felt less than proud of what I have done. I did what was necessary, for the benefit of others. If it had been up to me I would never have touched a single human being, but I am not complaining*

*"I do however ask you, humbly, if you have any scrap of decency left, if you have any integrity whatsoever, not to judge me. You do not have that right.*

*"Ask Carlo Sanchez, ask Alfonso Garadiana, ask Sayid Ramachandran, ask Billy Chen. Ask them what was the right thing to do. And then, when you've got the answer from their bleeding corpses, then, and only then, come to me."*

—Andrew Steele, 2020  
Statement before Board of Inquiry

Contemporary readers must remember the vast demographic and other circumstantial differences that make the early twenty-first century an alien land to us. When Steele was sixteen years old, the population of the world was an astonishing 6.8 billion, fully half of whom were under the age of twenty-five, the overwhelming majority of those young and striving individuals living in poverty, but with access, through the technologies that had spread widely over the previous twenty years, to unprecedented unregulated information. Few of them could be said to have been adequately acculturated. The history of the next forty years, including Steele's part in that history, was shaped by this fact.

In 2017, Steele was conscripted into the U.S. army pursuing the Oil War on two continents. Because he was fluent in Spanish, he served as an interrogator with the 71<sup>st</sup> infantry division stationed in Venezuela. His history as an interrogator included the debriefing of the rightfully elected president of that nation in 2019. Fiona puts us there:

*We are standing in the back of a small room with concrete walls, banks of fluorescent lights above, a HVAC vent and exposed ducts hanging from the ceiling. The room is cold. We have been standing for a long time and our back is stiff. We have seen many of these sessions, and all we can think about right now is getting out of here, getting a beer and getting some sleep.*

*In the center of the room Lieutenant Haslop and a civilian contractor are interrogating a small brown man with jet-black shoulder length hair. Haslop is very tall and stoop shouldered, probably from a lifetime of ducking responsibility. The men call him "Slop" behind his back.*

*The prisoner's name is Alfonso Garadiana. His wrists are tied together behind him, and the same rope stretches down to his ankles, also tied together. The rope is too short, so that the only way he can stand is with his knees flexed painfully. But every time he sways, as if to fall, the contractor signals Haslop, who pokes him with an electric prod. Flecks of*

*blood spot Garadiana's once brilliant white shirt. A cut over his eyebrow is crusted with dried blood, and the eye below it is half-closed.*

*The contractor, Mr. Gray, is neat and shaved and in control. "So," he says in Spanish, "where are the Jacaranda virus stores?"*

*Garadiana does not answer. It's unclear whether he has even understood.*

*Gray nods to Haslop again.*

*Haslop blinks his eyes, swallows. He slumps into a chair, rests his brow in one hand. "I can't do this anymore," he mutters, only apparently to himself. He wouldn't say it aloud if he didn't want us to hear it, even if he doesn't know that himself. We are sick to death of his weakness.*

*We step forward and take the prod from his hand. "Let me take care of this, sir." We swing the back of our hand against Garadiana's face, exactly the same motion we once used to hit a backhand in high school tennis. The man's head snaps back, and he falls to the floor. We move in with the prod.*

Upon the failure of the Oil War and the defeat of the government that pursued it, a reaction took place, including war crimes investigations that led to Steele's imprisonment from 2020 to 2025. Fiona gives us a glimpse of Steele's sensorium in his third year in maximum-security prison:

*We're hungry. Above us the air rattles from the ventilator. On the table before us in our jail cell is a notebook. We are writing our testament. It's a distillation of everything we know to be absolutely true about the human race and its future. There are things we know in our DNA that cannot be understood by strict rationality, though reason is a powerful tool and can help us to communicate these truths to those who do not, because of incapacity or lack of experience, grasp them instinctively.*

*The blogs back when we were fourteen were just practice. Here, thanks to the isolation, we are able to go deep, to find the roots of human truth and put them down in words.*

*We examine the last sentence we have written: "It is the hero's fate to be misunderstood."*

*A guard comes by and raps the bars of our cell. "Still working on the great opus, Andy?"*

*We ignore him, close the manuscript, move from the table, and begin to do push-ups in the narrow space beside the cot.*

*The guard raps again on the bars. "How about an answer, killer?" His voice is testy.*

*We concentrate on doing the push-ups correctly. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen . . .*

*When we get out of here, all this work will make a difference.*

This was indeed the case, Fiona shows us, but not in the way that Steele intended. As a work of philosophy his testament was rejected by all publishers. He struggled to make a living in the Long Emergency that was the result of the oil decline and the global warming-spawned environmental disasters that hit with full force in the 2020s. These changes were asymmetric, but though some regions felt them more than others, none were unaffected. The flipping of the Atlantic current turned 2022



into the first Year Without a Summer in Europe. Torrential rains in North Africa, the desertification of the North American Great Plains, mass wildlife migrations, drastic drops in grains production, die-offs of marine life and decimated global fish stocks were among only the most obvious problems with which worldwide civilization struggled. And Andrew Steele was out of prison, without a connection in the world.

### ARTIST

*"The great artist is a rapist. It is his job to plant a seed, an idea or an emotion, in the viewer's mind. He uses every tool available to enforce his will. The audience doesn't know what it wants, but he knows what it wants, and needs, and he gives it to them.*

*"To the degree I am capable of it, I strive to be a great artist."*

—Andrew Steele, 2037

"Man of Steele"

Interview on *VarietyNet*

**A**t this moment of distress, Steele saw an opportunity, and turned his political testament into a best-selling novel, *What's Wrong With Heroes?* A film deal followed immediately. Steele insisted on being allowed to write the screenplay, and against its better judgment, the studio relented. Upon its release, *What's Wrong With Heroes?* became the highest grossing film in the history of cinema. In the character of Roark McMaster, Steele created a virile philosopher king who spoke to the desperate hopes of millions. With the money he made, Steele conquered the entertainment world. A series of blockbuster films, television series, and virtual adventures followed. This photo link shows him on the set of *The Betrayal*, his historical epic of the late twentieth century. The series, conflating the Vietnam with two Iraq wars, presents the fiascos of the early twenty-first as the result of Machiavellian subversives and their bad-faith followers taking advantage of the innocence of the American populace, undermining what was once a strong and pure-minded nation.

Fiona gives us a key scene from the series:

#### INT. AMERICAN AIRLINES FLIGHT 11

Two of the hijackers, wearing green camo, are gathered around a large man seated in the otherwise empty first class cabin of the 757. The big man, unshaven, wears a shabby Detroit Tigers baseball cap.

WALEED

(frantic)

What shall we do now?

MOORE

Keep the passengers back in coach. Is  
Mohammad on course? How long?

ABDULAZIZ  
(calling back from cockpit)  
Allah willing—three minutes.

Moore glances out the plane window.

MOORE'S P.O.V.—through window, an aerial view of Manhattan on a beautiful clear day.

CLOSE ON MOORE

Smirks.

MOORE  
Time to go.

Moore hefts his bulk from the first class seat, moves toward the on-board baggage closet near the front of the plane.

ABDULAZIZ  
What are you doing?

From out of a hanging suit bag, Moore pulls a parachute, and straps it on.

WALEED  
Is this part of the plan?

Moore jerks up the lever on the plane's exterior door and yanks on it. It does not budge.

MOORE  
Don't just stand there, Waleed! Help me!

Waleed moves to help Moore, and reluctantly, Abdulaziz joins them.

ATTA  
(from cockpit)  
There it is! Allah akbar!

Moore and the other two hijackers break the seal and the door flies open. A blast of wind sucks Abdulaziz and Waleed forward; they fall back onto the plane's deck. Moore braces himself against the edge of the door with his hands.

MOORE  
In the name of the Democratic Party, the  
compassionate, the merciful—so long, boys!

Moore leaps out of the plane.

*The Betrayal* was the highest rated series ever to run on American television, and cemented Steele's position as the most bankable mass-appeal Hollywood producer since Spielberg. At the age of thirty-eight, Steele married the actress Esme Napoli, leading lady in three of his most popular films.

### RELIGIOUS LEADER

The next section of Fiona's biography begins with this heartrending experience from Steele's middle years:

*We are in a sumptuous hotel suite with a blonde, not wearing much of anything. We are chasing her around the bed.*

*"You can't catch me!"*

*We snag her around the waist, and pull her onto the bed. "I've already caught you. You belong to me." We hold up her ring finger, with its platinum band. "You see?"*

*"I'm full of nanomachines," she says breathlessly. "If you catch me you'll catch them."*

*The Scarlet Plague has broken out in Los Angeles, after raging for a month in Brazil. We have fled the city with Esme and are holed up in this remote hotel in Mexico.*

*"When are we going to have these children?" we ask her. "We need children. Six at least."*

*"You're going to have to work harder than this to deserve six children," Esme says. "The world is a mess. Do we want to bring children into it?"*

*"The world has always been a mess. We need to bring children into it because it's a mess." We kiss her perfect cheek.*

*But a minute later, as we make love, we spot the growing rash along the inside of Esme's thigh.*

The death of Steele's wife came near the beginning of the plague decade, followed by the Sudden War and the Collapse. Fiona cites the best estimates of historiographers that, between 2040 and 2062, the human population of the earth went from 8.2 to somewhat less than two billion. The toll was slightly higher in the less developed nations; on the other hand, resistance to the plagues was higher among humans of the tropical regions. This situation in the middle years of the century transformed the Long Emergency of 2020 to 2040—a condition in which civilization, although stressed, might still be said to function, and with which Steele and his generation had coped—into the Die Off, in which the only aspect of civilization that, even in the least affected regions, might be said to function was a desperate triage.

One of the results of the Long Emergency had been to spark widespread religious fervor. Social and political disruptions had left millions searching for certitudes. Longevity breakthroughs, new medicine, genetic engineering, cyborging, and AI pushed in one direction, while widespread

climactic change, fights against deteriorating civil and environmental conditions, and economic disruptions pushed in another. The young warred against the old, the rich against the poor. Reactionary religious movements raged on four continents. Interpreting the chaos of the twenty-first century in terms of eschatology was a winning business. Terrorism in the attempt to bring on utopia or the end of the world was a common reality. Steele, despite his grief, rapidly grasped that art, even popular art, had no role in this world. So he turned, readily, to religion.

*“Human evolution is a process of moral evolution. The thing that makes us different from animals is our understanding of the ethical implications of every action that we perform: those that we must perform, those that we choose. Some actions are matters of contingency, and some are matters of free will.*

*“Evolution means we will eventually come to fill the universe. To have our seed spread far and wide. That is what we are here for. To engender those children, to bear them, to raise them properly, to have them extend their—and our—thought, creativity, joy, understanding, to every particle of the visible universe.”*

—Andrew Steele, 2052  
Sermon in the Cascades

Steele’s Church of Humanity grew rapidly in the 2040s; while the population died and cities burned, its membership more than doubled every year, reaching several million by 2050. Steele’s credo of the Hero transferred easily to religious terms; his brilliantly orchestrated ceremonies sparked ecstatic responses; he fed the poor and comforted the afflicted, and using every rhetorical device at his command, persuaded his followers that the current troubles were the birth of a new utopian age, that every loss had its compensation, that sacrifice was noble, that reward was coming, that from their loins would spring a new and better race, destined to conquer the stars. Love was the answer.

His creed crossed every ethnic, racial, sexual, gender preference, class, and age barrier. Everyone was human, and all equal.

The Church of Humanity was undeniably successful in helping millions of people, not just in the United States but across the bleeding globe, deal with the horrors of the Die Off. It helped them to rally in the face of unimaginable psychological and material losses. But it was not the only foundation for the recovery. By the time some semblance of order was restored to world affairs in the 2060s, genetically modified humans, the superbrights, were attempting to figure a way out of the numerous dead ends of capitalism, antiquated belief systems, and a dysfunctional system of nation states. This was a period of unexampled experimentation, and the blossoming of many technologies that had been only potentialities prior to the collapse, among them the uploading of human identities, neurological breakthroughs on the origins of altruism and violence, grafted information capacities, and free quantum energy.

Most of these developments presented challenges to religion. Steele

came to see such changes as a threat to fundamental humanity. So began his monstrous political career.

## POLITICIAN

*"The greatest joy in life is putting yourself in the circumstance of another person. To see the world through his eyes, to feel the air on her skin, to breathe in deeply the spirit of their souls. To have his joy and trouble be equally real to you. To know that others are fully and completely human, just as you are. To get outside of your own subjectivity, and to see the world from a completely different and equally valid perspective, to come fully to understand them. When that point of understanding is reached, there is no other word for the feeling that you have than love. Just as much as you love yourself, as you love your children, you love this other.*

*"And at that point, you must exterminate them."*

—Andrew Steele, 2071  
*What I Believe*

**S**teele was swept into office as President of the reconstituted United States in the election of 2064, with his Humanity Party in complete control of the Congress. In his first hundred days, Steele signed a raft of legislation comprising his Humanity Initiative. Included were the Repopulation Act that forced all women of childbearing age to have no fewer than four children, a bold space colonization program, restrictions on genetic alterations and technological body modifications, the wiping clean of all uploaded personalities from private and public databases, the Turing Limit on AI, the Neurological Protection Act of 2065, and the establishment of a legal "standard human being."

In Steele's first term, "non-standard" humans were allowed to maintain their civil rights, but were identified by injected markers, their movements and employment restricted by the newly established Humanity Agency. Through diplomacy efforts and the international efforts of the Church of Humanity, similar policies were adapted, with notable areas of resistance, throughout much of the world.

In Steele's second term, the HA was given police powers and the non-standard gradually stripped of civil and property rights. By his third term, those who had not managed to escape the country lost all legal rights and were confined to posthuman reservations, popularly known as "Freak Towns." The establishment of the Protectorate over all of North and South America stiffened resistance elsewhere, and resulted in the uneasy Global Standoff. Eventually, inevitably, came the First and Second Human Wars.

Fiona includes a never-before-experienced moment from the twenty-third year of Steele's presidency.

*We are in a command bunker, a large, splendidly appointed room one whole wall of which is a breathtaking view of the Grand Tetons.*

*We sit at a table with our closest advisors, listening to General Jinjur describe their latest defeat by the New Humans. There are tears in her eyes as she recounts the loss of the Fifth Army in the assault on Madrid.*

*We do not speak. Our cat, Socrates, sits on our lap, and we scratch him behind his ears. He purrs.*

*"How many dead?" Chief of Command Taggart asks.*

*"Very few, sir," reports Jinjur. "But over 90 percent converted. It's their new amygdalic bomb. It destroys our troops' will to fight. The soldiers just lay down their arms and go off looking for something to eat. You try organizing an autistic army."*

*"At least they're good at math," says Secretary Bloom.*

*"How can these posthumans persist?" Dexter asks. "We've exterminated millions. How many of them are left?"*

*"We can't know, sir. They keep making more."*

*"But they don't even fight," says Taggart. "They must be on the point of extinction."*

*"It has never been about fighting, sir."*

*"It's this damned subversion," says Taggart. "We have traitors among us. They seed genetic changes among the people. They turn our own against us. How can we combat that?"*

*General Jinjur gathers herself. She is quite a striking woman, the flower of the humanity we have fought to preserve for so many years. "If I may be permitted to say so, we are fighting ourselves. We are trying to conquer our own human élan. Do you want to live longer? Anyone who wants to live longer will eventually become posthuman. Do you want to understand the universe? Anyone who wants to understand the universe will eventually become posthuman. Do you want peace of mind? Anyone who wants peace of mind will eventually become posthuman."*

*Something in her tone catches us, and we are finally moved to speak. "You are one of them, aren't you."*

*"Yes," she says.*

The contemporary citizen need not be troubled with, and Fiona does not provide, any detailed recounting of the war's progress, or how it ended in the Peace that Passeth All Understanding of 2096. The treatment of the remaining humans, the choices offered them, the removal of those few persisting to Mars, and their continued existence there under quarantine, are all the material for another work.

Similarly, the circumstances surrounding Steele's death—the cross, the taser, the Shetland pony—so much a subject of debate, speculation, and conspiracy theory, surely do not need rehearsing here. We know what happened to him. He destroyed himself.

### AWAITING FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS

*"The highest impulse of which a human being is capable is to sacrifice himself in the service of the community of which he is a part, even when*



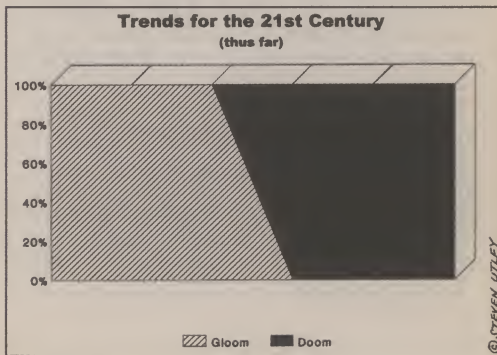
him for that sacrifice. In fact, such scorn is more often than not to be expected. The true savior of his fellows is not deterred by the prospect of rejection, though carrying the burden of his unappreciated gift is a trial that he can never, but for a few moments, escape. It is the hero's fate to be misunderstood."

*What's Wrong with Heroes?* (unpublished version)

**F**iona 13 ends her biography with a simple accounting of the number of beings, human and posthuman, who died as a result of Steele's life. She speculates that many of these same beings might not have lived had he not lived as well, and comes to no formal conclusion, utilitarian or otherwise, as to the moral consequences of the life of Dwight Andrew Steele.

Certainly few tears are shed for Steele, and few for the ultimate decline of the human race. I marvel at that remnant of humans who, using technologies that he abhorred, have incorporated into their minds a slice of Steele's personality in the attempt to make themselves into the image of the man they see as their savior. Indeed, I must confess to more than a passing interest in their poignant delusions, their comic, mystifying pastimes, their habitual conflicts, their simple loves and hates, their inability to control themselves, their sudden and tragic enthusiasms.

Bootlegged Steele personalities circulate in the Cognosphere, and it may be that those of you who, like me, on occasion edit their capacities in order to spend recreational time being human, will avail themselves of this no doubt unique and terrifying experience. ○



# GALAXY BLUES

CONCLUSION

## THE GREAT BEYOND

Allen M. Steele

Now that he's finished two spin-off novels set in the same universe (i.e., *Spindrift* and *Galaxy Blues*), Allen Steele tells us he's hard at work on *Coyote Horizon*, which will continue the storyline established in the original trilogy. Allen blames his frequent returns to Coyote on his readers. "They have demanded that I keep writing these books, and I'm all too happy to comply."

Synopsis of Parts One through Three:

*My name is Jules Truffaut, and this is the story of how I redeemed the human race.*

*It all began when I stowed away aboard the starship Robert E. Lee for its monthly voyage to Coyote, humankind's first interstellar colony. Technically speaking, I was a first-class passenger, having already booked passage to 47 Ursae Majoris. However, as a former ensign in the Union Astronautica of the Western Hemisphere—whose relationship with Coyote is strained at best—it was necessary for me to sneak aboard the ship just before it departed from Earth.*

*My plan was to travel to Coyote under an assumed identity; once there, I would plead for political asylum. But my scheme backfired when a steward*

who'd found me became suspicious. Checking the manifest, she discovered that, although I had indeed purchased a ticket, there was no record of me actually boarding the ship. So shortly after the Lee jumped through Earth's starbridge to 47 Ursae Majoris, the chief petty officer placed me under arrest.

On the bridge, I met the Lee's commanding officer, Anastasia Tereshkova. Realizing that I was in serious trouble, I revealed my true identity and informed her that I was seeking amnesty. However, I'd overlooked the fact that one has to actually set foot on foreign soil in order to defect. Since the Lee was still in space, Tereshkova was obliged to take me back to Earth and turn me over to the authorities.

So I took matters into my own hands. On my way to the brig, I escaped from my captors and stole one of the ship's lifeboats. I was trained as a pilot, so I was able to guide the craft to a safe touchdown on Coyote. However, almost as soon as I landed, I was apprehended by the colonial militia.

The soldiers brought me to Liberty, Coyote's largest colony, where I was thrown in jail. I had little doubt that the local magistrates would order my deportation. Before that happened, though, I had two visitors. The first was a mysterious figure who appeared at my cell window. As he stared at me, a door opened in my mind, releasing all my memories. I fell unconscious; when I awoke, the stranger had disappeared.

The second was Morgan Goldstein, the billionaire founder of Janus, Ltd., an interstellar shipping company. Impressed by the way I'd escaped from the Lee, he offered a way out of my predicament. Goldstein was recruiting a crew for an expedition to Rho Coronae Borealis, with the intent of opening trade with its inhabitants, the alien hjadd. If I signed on as shuttle pilot, he would make sure that I wasn't deported. Having little choice, I agreed to work for him.

After arranging for my release, Goldstein took me to a tavern where I met the rest of the crew: the captain, Ted Harker, and his wife and first officer, Emily Collins, both of whom were on the first ship to contact the hjadd; the helmsman, Ali Youssef; and the cargo master, a lovely young woman by the name of Rain Thompson, who was oddly cold toward me. And finally, another passenger besides Goldstein himself: Gordon Ash, whom I recognized as the stranger who'd visited me in jail.

Our ship, the *Pride of Cucamonga*, hadn't arrived from Earth yet, so we cooled our heels in Liberty for a few days. That gave me time to get interested in Rain. She didn't want anything to do with me, though, and it wasn't until I had breakfast with her that I found out what the problem was. Somehow, she had learned the reason why I'd been thrown out of the Union Astronautica—I was caught helping my younger brother Jim cheat on his academy exams—and, believing that I'd betrayed him, thought I couldn't be trusted. I was telling her my side of the story when Ted showed up. Our ship had come in, and it was time for us to leave.

When we arrived at the spaceport to board our shuttle, the *Loose Lucy*, a couple of surprises awaited us. The first was our cargo: two and a half tons of marijuana, which the hjadd apparently regarded as a delicacy. The second was that we had another passenger: Mahamatasja Jas Sa-Fhadda—Jas for short, the hjadd Prime Emissary. When I committed a faux pas

during my introduction to himher, Ash stepped in to quietly correct me. Clearly there was more to him than met the eye.

The *Pride of Cucamonga* turned out to be an old freighter, but its chief engineer, Doc Schachner, assured us that it was fit to fly. While loading the cargo, Rain and I had an argument which nearly cost me my job; to give me a chance to cool off, Ted had me take a jug of corn liquor to Ash's quarters. I'd already figured out that Ash was an alcoholic, but while visiting him, I discovered something else: he was capable of reading people's minds.

The next day, the *Pride* launched from Coyote orbit. While en route to the starbridge—which could only be opened to Rho Coronae Borealis by a coded key Jas carried—the Prime Emissary invited Rain and me to his quarters. While waiting for himher to let us in, Rain offered an apology for her rude behavior, which I accepted. But she wasn't the only person to surprise me: once we were alone with Jas, heshe asked what we knew about something called the Order of the Eye. I professed ignorance, but after we left hisher cabin, Rain informed me that the Order was a secret cult of telepaths rumored to be funded by Goldstein. This explained why Morgan had invited Ash along: he wanted someone who might be able to tell him what Jas was thinking.

Then *Pride* made the jump to Hjarr, where we rendezvoused with an enormous space colony, the Talus qua'spah, in orbit above the planet. As circumstances would have it, Rain and I were the first people to leave the ship. Upon entering what appeared to be an interspecies reception area, we were informed that the two of us needed to undergo decontamination. There was an awkward moment when we had to get naked in front of each other; once we got past that, though, we proceeded to living quarters specially designed for human visitors, where we were soon joined by the rest of the crew.

Cargo unloading went as planned, but not the trade negotiations. Goldstein found that, in exchange for the cannabis we'd brought with us, all the hjadd were willing to give us were two thousand artifacts little more useful than as paperweights. Nor was Ash much help; since the hjadd didn't actually think in our language, his ability to read their minds was useless. Frustrated by his failure to gain the advanced technology he desired, Goldstein took it out on us. I was informed that my job would be terminated as soon as the ship returned to Coyote, with my amnesty arrangement rendered null and void.

Before the *Pride* left Talus qua'spah, though, we were obliged to attend a reception being thrown in our honor. Just prior to this, the hjadd sent food to our quarters. Ted warned us against sampling the native cuisine, but I was hungry enough to try something that tasted like spice cakes. Little did I know that they'd been made with some of the cannabis we'd brought with us. So I was quite stoned when we arrived at the reception; in my looped state of mind, I inadvertently insulted the chaaz'braan, the supreme religious leader for most of the civilized galaxy.

The hjadd were not amused, and it appeared that relations between humankind and the rest of the galaxy had come to a premature end. However, the High Council offered us a chance to make amends: take the *Pride* via starbridge to a distant solar system, where we were to place a probe directly in the path of Kasimasta, an enormous rogue black hole that had al-

ready destroyed several inhabited worlds and was about to annihilate yet another.

Unwilling to put his ship in jeopardy, Ted refused to do this. But the *hjadd* weren't taking no for an answer. When the *Pride* jumped away from Rho Coronae Borealis, we found ourselves not back in the 47 Ursae Majoris system, but instead above a so-called "hot Jupiter" in close orbit around 51 Pegasi. Jas had reprogrammed the navigation computer to bring us there, and told Ted that heshe would not release the proper coordinates unless we agreed to undertake the mission that we'd been given. Our choice was plain: face Kasimasta, or be roasted alive.

So off we went, to HD 70642 and a rendezvous with the most terrifying force in the galaxy.

## SIXTEEN

*Firemen in a burning house . . . who bells the cat? . . . the trouble with women . . . words for the blues.*

### I

**W**e came through the starbridge at HD 70642 to find ourselves in a traffic jam.

That's the only way to describe what I saw through the portholes. Emily had raised the shutters just before the *Pride* made the jump from 51 Pegasi, and it's fortunate that she'd taken that precaution—otherwise we might have struck the nearest starship waiting to enter the ring. As it was, the first thing we heard upon coming out of hyperspace was the shriek of the collision alarm, followed by a string of Arabic blasphemies from Ali as he hastened to switch off the autopilot and take control of the helm.

Jas hadn't been kidding when heshe told us that the nord were evacuating their home world. All around us, as far as the eye could see, was a vast swarm of what appeared to be titanic jellyfish, their umbrella-like membranes several miles in diameter. It wasn't until the *Pride* passed the one with which we'd nearly collided that we saw its translucent hood was, in fact, a solar sail. Tethered behind it was a streamlined cylinder a little smaller than our own ship, its hull ringed with dozens of portholes.

A high-pitched voice like that of an irate turkey gobbled at us from the speakers, its language indecipherable but the meaning nonetheless obvious: *watch where you're going, jackass!* Jas patched into the comlink and responded in hisher own tongue. Apparently the nord captain had his own translator, because after a brief bit of back-and-forth between them, the com went silent.

It's been said that a fireman is someone crazy enough to run into a burning house while everyone else is running out. That's what I felt like just then. As the *Pride* slowly glided between the scores of nord vessels waiting their turn to collapse their sails and enter the starbridge, I saw a civilization in full rout. Several hundred thousand miles away, Nordash

was a blue-green marble that bore an unsettling similarity to Earth; it was all too easy to imagine multitudes of nord—whatever they looked like—clamoring to board the shuttles that would ferry them to starships in orbit above their doomed world. How many of their kind would be left behind, though, and where the survivors intended to go, we did not know. Nonetheless, we were witnessing an interstellar diaspora.

No one said much of anything as the *Pride* carefully picked its way through the evacuation fleet. Save for a few subdued words between Ted and Ali, a dark silence fell over the command center, and it wasn't until our ship had eased past the outermost ships of the nord armada that anyone was able to breathe easy again. But we were far from safe. The nord were leaving . . . and we'd just arrived. Like firemen in a burning house.

Ted instructed Ali to get a fix on Aerik and start plotting a trajectory, then he unfastened his harness and pushed himself out of his seat. "Right, then," he said quietly, grabbing hold of the ceiling rail. "Everyone who doesn't have business here just now is relieved . . . at least for the time being. Take a nap, get a bite to eat, whatever. We'll call you back when we need you."

Good idea. I got up from my seat, arched my back to get rid of the kinks, then looked over at Rain. She didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave the bridge; there was a pensive look on her face as she gazed out the nearest window. I hesitated, then decided to let her be. All I wanted to do was follow Ted's advice: change out of my sweaty clothes, grab a sandwich, and maybe catch a few winks in my hammock.

As I floated over toward the manhole, Ash rose to join me. Morgan didn't pay any attention to him—indeed, it seemed as if Goldstein was deliberately ignoring him—and Jas remained strapped into hiser couch. Ash didn't say anything as we entered the access shaft, but as soon as we were alone, he took hold of my arm.

"Keep an eye on Youssef," he whispered. Before I could ask why, he beat me to it. "I caught something from him just before we went into hyperspace. The only reason Jas is still alive is because Ali knows we still need himher."

"Yeah, well . . ." I was too tired to deal with it just then. "I figured that already. But Ali's not dumb enough to . . ."

"All I'm saying is, keep an eye on him. Okay?" Ash let go of my arm and pushed past me. "We have enough problems as is."

## II

I went down to my cabin and put on some fresh clothes, then floated down the corridor to the wardroom. I was making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when three bells rang, giving me just enough time to stow everything away and plant my toes within a foot restraint before main engine ignition. I could tell from the way the ship trembled that it was no maneuvering burn; the *Pride* was slowly building up thrust, and it wouldn't be long before its acceleration reached one gee. The captain wasn't sparing the horsies. At least we'd be able to move around the ship without having to use hand rails.

Just about the time I was finishing lunch, Ted's voice came over my



headset, asking if I'd return to the bridge. So much for my nap. When I got to the command deck, I found that everyone had left except for him, Doc, and Ali. Ted's face was grim as he waved me toward Emily's seat.

"We've set course for Aerik," he began, "and Ali and I have come up with a tentative mission profile. Sorry to bother you, but we thought that you needed to be in on this stage of the planning."

"Sure. No problem." I gazed at the holo tank. A model of the local system was suspended above the console, with the orbits of Nordash and Aerik depicted as elliptical circles surrounding HD 70642. A curved red line was traced between the two planets. "Is that our course?"

"Uh-huh." Ted entered a command in his keyboard that overlaid a three-dimensional graph upon the holo. "We're pretty lucky, actually. They're presently in conjunction, with both at perihelion on the same side of the sun. So instead of being three a.u.'s apart, their average distance at almost any other time, instead they're only about one and a half a.u.'s away from each other . . . approximately two and a quarter million kilometers."

I nodded. The Nordash system wasn't nearly as large as Earth's, which was fortunate for us. The nord would've disagreed, of course. Just then, they would have preferred that their world was at aphelion on the far side of the sun . . . or, in fact, anywhere *Kasimasta* wasn't.

"Anyway," Ted continued, "this means we should be able to reach Aerik before *Kasimasta* does . . . provided, of course, that we don't do any sight-seeing along the way. I've given the order to run the main engine at its rated capacity, two hundred and fifty thousand impulses-per-second. Once we reach cruise velocity, we'll be doing about twenty-five hundred kilometers per second."

My heart skipped a beat. Maybe it wasn't light-speed, but it was a sizable fraction nonetheless. "Good grief, skipper . . . do we have enough fuel for that?"

Ted glanced over at Doc. "The *Pride* has sufficient reserves for four and a quarter a.u.'s," he said, "enough to get from Earth to Jupiter and back again. We barely put a dent in that on the way to Hjarr, thanks to the star-bridges, and the *hjadd* were kind enough to top off our tank before we left."

"Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but—" Ted grimaced "—well, we now know that they didn't exactly do this out of the kindness of their hearts. From what Jas told us, the *Talus* High Council never intended to take no for an answer."

"Of course," Doc continued, "we may need a tow by the time we return to *Talus qua'spah*, and I can tell you right now that Mr. Goldstein is going to have to pay for a major overhaul . . . but, yeah, I think we'll make it."

"At any rate," Ted went on, "this means that our ETA will be approximately thirty hours from now. That should give you enough time to prepare for your part of the mission." He hesitated. "And here's where things become a bit dicey."

He magnified the image within the holo tank so that Aerik and its satellites increased in size. "There's *Kha-Zann*," he said, pointing to a large moon at the periphery of the system. "Approximately the same mass and diameter as Europa, with much the same surface gravity. Carbon dioxide atmosphere, but not very dense . . . about a hundred and fifty

millibars at the equator . . . but enough to give you some measure of protection."

"Protection?" Although I'd had experience with landing on atmospheric planets, I would have preferred to set down on an airless moon. "Against what?"

Ted took a deep breath. "By the time you get there, Kasimasta will only be about eight hundred thousand kilometers away . . ."

"Oh, hell!"

"I told you this was the dicey part." A humorless smile played across his face. "At least the atmosphere will provide you with some radiation protection while you're down there. And Kasimasta will be coming in hot . . . mainly X-rays from its accretion disc. So the less time you spend on the surface, the better. In fact, I'd recommend landing close to the daylight terminator, if at all possible."

"Uh-huh. And how long will I have to . . .?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. First things first." Ted pointed to the red thread of the *Pride's* trajectory. "Here's the game plan. Once we're on primary approach to Aerik and the *Pride* has initiated its braking maneuver, you'll take *Lucy* away. Our trajectory will bring us within a hundred and thirty thousand kilometers of Kha-Zann, so you shouldn't have to consume much fuel getting there."

The holo image zoomed in again, this time to display *Loose Lucy's* departure from the *Pride* and its rendezvous with Kha-Zann. "In the meantime," Ted went on, "the *Pride* will continue toward Aerik and swing around it, initiating a periapsis burn at closest approach to the far side of the planet. That'll put us on a return heading that'll bring us back toward Kha-Zann, where we'll pick you up."

"Why not go into orbit around Kha-Zann itself?"

"We thought of that," Ali said, "but when we ran a simulation, we discovered that it would take too much time to establish orbit around Kha-Zann. Not only that, but once we broke orbit, we'd have to build up enough thrust again to achieve escape velocity, and by then Kasimasta would catch up with us. This way, we use a slingshot maneuver around Aerik to keep from shedding too much velocity. Once we fire the main engine, we blow out of there before Kasimasta reaches Kha-Zann."

"If all goes well, that is," Ted added.

I didn't like the sound of that. "What could go wrong?"

"Well . . ." Doc began, then shook his head. "All this means you're going to have a very tight window. No more than an hour on the surface . . . and believe me, that's stretching it."

I stared at him. "An hour? You've got to be . . ."

"No, he's not." Ted's face was serious. "And neither am I. You land, you drop off the probe, you take off again. If everything works according to plan, you should be able to reach the rendezvous point just in time to dock with the *Pride* as we swing by again. Otherwise . . ."

His voice trailed off. Not that he had to spell it out. If I failed to reach the *Pride*, then the captain would have no choice but to leave me behind. By then, the ship would be racing just ahead of the Annihilator, with no time left to make orbit around Kha-Zann and wait for me to show up.

"Yeah. Got it." I let out my breath. "So I'm the poor mouse who gets to put the bell around the cat's neck."

"Mouse? Cat?" Ali's expression was quizzical. "What are you talking about?"

"Old fable, courtesy of Aesop," I said, and Ali shook his head. Chalk it up to cultural differences. "Never mind. Just do me a favor and download everything into *Lucy's* comp. I'll run a simulation from the cockpit, make sure that everything . . ."

"Just one more thing." Ted looked at the others, then back at me again. "You're not going to be able to do this alone. Someone will have to help you unload the probe and place it on the surface, so you're going to have to take another person with you."

That hadn't occurred to me, but now that he mentioned it, I knew he was right. I'd have to use the cargo elevator to remove the probe from *Lucy's* hold and put it on the ground. I could conceivably do it by myself, but not within the short amount of time I'd have on Kha-Zann. Like it or not, someone else would have to ride down with me.

"Yeah, okay." I glanced at Doc. "You up for this, chief? I know it's a lot to ask, but . . ."

"Sorry. Not me." Doc shook his head. "I've got to stay aboard, try to keep the ship from rattling apart at the seams."

"And don't ask for Emily, either," Ted said. "I know she's qualified, but there's no way I'm putting my wife at risk." He hesitated. "Besides, we already have someone . . . Rain."

A chill ran down my back. "Skipper . . . Ted . . . please don't do this. I can't . . ."

All of a sudden, I found myself unable to finish what I wanted to say—*I can't put her life in jeopardy any more than you can put Emily's*—because that would've meant admitting more than I was willing to these men, or perhaps even to myself.

So I played stubborn instead. "Look, I can take care of this on my own. No reason to get her involved."

Ted frowned. "Are you telling me you're still not able to work with her?"

That looked like an easy way out. "Yeah, that's what I'm saying. Cap, you don't know what a pain in the ass she . . ."

"Well, that's just too bad . . . because she's already volunteered." A sly smile; Ted didn't have to be a telepath to know a lie when he heard it. "And here I thought the two of you were getting along so well."

"Nice try, though," Doc murmured.

My face grew warm, but before I could respond, Ted nodded toward the manhole. "Right, then . . . unless you have any more questions, you've got a lot of work ahead of you. All of us do."

There was nothing left to be discussed, so I headed for the access shaft. I waited until I shut the hatch behind me before, still clinging to the ladder, I threw my fist into the nearest bulkhead.

### III

The rest of the day was spent preparing for the mission.

Before that, though, I tracked down Rain and gave her a piece of my

mind. Not that it got me anywhere. She was having lunch with Emily when I found her in the wardroom; seeing the look on my face, the first officer quietly excused herself and gave us the room, and once the door was shut I blew up. I don't remember most of what I said—I was just venting, really—but Rain just sat there and took it, silently regarding me with solemn eyes that I couldn't quite bring myself to meet. And when I was done, she polished off the rest of her coffee, stood up from the table, and quietly suggested that we head down to the shuttle and check out the probe.

And that was it. We never had an argument because she refused to argue in the first place. Besides, she'd already received Ted's blessing, so my opinion didn't really count. That's the trouble with women: they're smarter than men, and therefore enjoy an unfair advantage. And the hell of it is that they know it, too.

The hjadd probe was located in *Lucy's* cargo hold, strapped to the deck right where Jas said it would be. Hisher people had smuggled it aboard inside a crate identical to those they'd used to pack the *gnoshes*; even if I'd spotted it before we left Talus qua'spah, I probably would have assumed it was a box that had somehow got misplaced.

Before I could open it, though, Rain stopped me. "Perhaps we should ask Jas to do it for us; no telling what other tricks heshe had up hisher sleeve." So I got on the comlink and asked Ted to relay our request to the Prime Emissary, and a little while later Jas came down from hisher quarters.

I noticed that heshe still wore hisher weapon around the left wrist of hisher environment suit; apparently Jas wasn't quite ready to trust anyone aboard not to take revenge for hisher actions. Remembering what Ash had said to me earlier, I couldn't blame himher. Nonetheless, I didn't say anything about it. Rain saw the weapon, too, but kept her mouth shut. Like I said, a smart girl.

Jas assured us that the crate wasn't booby-trapped, and I opened it just the way I had the others. Tucked inside was a compact sphere, about three and a half feet in diameter, its burnished silver surface lined with hexagonal panels. Arranged around its equator were rungs suitable for either hjadd or human hands; recessed within the topmost panel were three small studs, blue, red, and white. Once the probe was in place, Jas told us, we were to press first the blue button, then the red, and finally the white. That was it—the probe would do the rest.

"Of course," I said, "you can come along with us and make sure that we get it right. We've got lots of room for passengers."

I was only half-joking when I said this, but apparently I struck a nerve, for the faceplate of hisher helmet swung sharply toward me. "My suit is not meant to be worn outside an atmospheric environment," Jas replied, as if that explained everything. "The probe is designed for simplicity of operation. My assistance is not necessary."

"How interesting." Rain bent over the probe to study it closely. "Your people build a device to study a black hole, but you made it so that it could be operated by another race." She looked up at himher. "Guess you're just lucky we happened to come along at the right time."

Jas was silent for a moment. Hisher suit concealed the mannerisms I'd learned to interpret—the attitude of hisher fin, whether or not hisher

throat sacs were inflated—but nonetheless I had a sense that hisher reticence stemmed from embarrassment. “My people always have others assume risks on our behalf,” heshe said at last. “It’s our way.”

“So that’s how we . . .” I began, but before I could finish, Jas turned away from us. Without another word, heshe left the hold, climbing back up the ladder toward the top hatch.

“Coward,” I murmured, once he was gone.

“Don’t blame himher,” Rain said quietly. “Morgan told us about the hjadd, remember? They’re not accustomed to taking chances.”

“Yeah, well . . . why is heshe aboard, then?”

“I have a feeling that being here isn’t hisher choice either.” She swatted my arm. “C’mon. Back to work.”

We made sure that the cargo lift was operational, then returned to the flight deck. I downloaded the mission program from the *Pride* and began to put *Lucy* through a complete diagnostics check. Rain stayed for a little while, but there wasn’t much she could do, so after a bit she returned to the ship with the intent of outfitting our suits for surface work.

I remained in the shuttle for the next few hours, repeatedly running simulations of our flight plan, tweaking the variables with each iteration so that I’d have practice dealing with whatever problems we might encounter along the way. I was feeling a little more confident about the mission, but I still wasn’t satisfied that I’d considered everything that might possibly go wrong. Still, I knew that if I didn’t get some rest, my reflexes would be sluggish by the time I had to do this for real. So I put *Lucy* to sleep and returned to the *Pride*.

The ship was quiet, save for the background rumble of the main engine, and I figured that everyone had sacked out. I was still wide-awake, though. Even as I opened the hatch leading to Deck Two, I realized that, if I went back to my cabin, I’d probably just stare at the ceiling. I was thinking about going up top to visit whoever was on watch—Doc, probably, or maybe Emily—when a familiar sound came to me: Ash’s guitar, its melancholy chords gently reverberating off the corridor walls.

What the hell. Might as well see what the ol’ geek was up to. Before I had a chance to knock at his door, Ash’s voice came to me from the other side. “C’mon in, Jules. We’ve been waiting for you.”

We? Ash usually kept to himself. When I slid open the door, though, I found that he wasn’t alone. Ash was sitting in his hammock, his guitar cradled in his lap, and seated on the floor next to him was Rain.

She smiled up at me. “Don’t look so shocked. We figured you’d show up sooner or later.” She patted the floor beside her. “Here. Sit.”

“And while you’re at it, have a drink.” Ash picked up a jug of bearshine and offered it to me.

“Umm . . . no thanks.” I shook my head as I squatted down next to Rain. “Better not.”

“Oh, c’mon.” Rain took the jug from Ash. “We still have—” a quick glance at her watch “—sixteen hours before we have to leave. Plenty of time to get properly pissed and sober up again.”

With that, she pulled out the cork and, using both hands, tilted back the jug. For a woman who’d once told me she didn’t drink, Rain certainly

knew how to swallow. A long gulp that seemed to last forever, then she gasped. "Hot damn, that's good." She wiped her lips with the back of her hand, then held out the jug. "Go ahead. Don't be shy."

The old pilot's rule is twelve hours from bottle to throttle; I had that, with a few hours to spare. So I accepted the jug from her and raised it to my mouth. I'd never had corn liquor before. It went down like molten lava, burning my throat, and I nearly choked on it. But she was right; just then, it tasted pretty damn good.

"There's the man." Ash grinned, then held out his hand. "Here, now. Time to pay the piper." Rain took the jug from me and passed it back to him. A quick, thirsty slug, then he set it on the floor between the three of us. "All right, then . . . piper's been paid. Let's see if he can entertain the rats."

His hands returned to his guitar, but instead of the random progression I'd heard before, this time his fingers produced a slow, boozy ramble, like something that might come from a roadhouse band south of the Mason-Dixon. "Been working on that song," Ash added, glancing up at me from his instrument. "Think I finally might have some words for it . . ."

Then he sang:

*Ninety light-years from home,*

*Lord, you gotta pay your dues.*

*Ninety light-years from home,*

*I got nuthin' to lose.*

*My spaceship's a junker, and I'm out for a cruise,*

*I gotta bad ol' case of the Galaxy Blues.*

All right, so maybe it wasn't Jelly Roll Morton. All the same, it gave me a reason to smile for the first time in days. "I thought you said music doesn't need words," I said, reaching for the bearshine again.

"Changed my mind," Ash muttered, then he went on:

*Stars all around me,*

*And I got nowhere to go.*

*Stars are all around me,*

*And light moves too slow.*

*I got planets in my pocket and black holes in my shoes,*

*It's another phase of the Galaxy . . .*

Wham! Something hit the door so hard that Rain and I both jumped an inch. My first thought was that there had been some catastrophic accident, such as the main fuel tank exploding, yet when it repeated a moment later—wham! wham!—I realized that someone was hammering at the door.

Ash was the only one who wasn't perturbed. Although he stopped singing, he continued to strum at his guitar. "Yes, Mr. Goldstein, you may come in," he said, as calm as calm could be.

The door slammed open, and there was Morgan, bleary-eyed and wearing only his robe. "All right, you punks, that's enough!" he snarled. "Some of us are trying to sleep here, and you three are keeping us . . ."

"Mr. Goldstein . . . Morgan . . ." Ash sighed, still not looking up at him. "If you don't shut up and leave, I'm going to tell my friends how you earned your first million dollars." He paused, then added, "How you *really* earned your first million dollars."

Morgan's face went pale as all the bluster and fury of his entrance sud-



denly dissipated. He started to open his mouth, but then Ash lifted his eyes to gaze at him, and he abruptly seemed to reconsider whatever he was going to say. The two men stared at each other for another moment . . . and then, without so much as another word, Morgan stepped out of the cabin and quietly pulled the door shut.

For a second or two, no one said anything. I finally looked at Ash. "Y'know," I murmured, "I want to be just like you when I grow up."

Rain was similarly impressed. "How did you do that?" she whispered, just as awestruck as I was.

Ash only shrugged as he went on playing his guitar. "If there's one thing that scares guys like Morgan, it's having people find out the truth about them." A secretive smile. "And believe me, he's got some pretty nasty skeletons in his closet."

I remembered the last time Ash had told Morgan to shut up, back on Talus qua'spah. I'd thought then that it was some sort of psychic trick . . . and perhaps it was, to the extent that the Order knew things about Morgan that he'd rather not be made public. But the fact of the matter was, all Ash had to do was verbally remind Morgan that he had the boss by the short hairs.

"Oh, do tell." Rain inched a little closer. "I'd love to know what . . ."

"Sorry. My order prohibits me from talking about things like that." Ash gave her a wink. "Not that Morgan knows this, of course. Now pass me the jug, and I'll tell you about a sweet young girl from Nantucket. . . ."

And it pretty much went downhill from there. In deference to anyone besides Goldstein who might be trying to sleep, we tried to keep it down . . . but nonetheless, as the jug made its way around the circle, the songs became ruder, the jokes more coarse, as the three of us laughed and sang our way long into the perpetual night.

The irony wasn't lost on me that, only this morning, I'd sworn I'd never drink again. Nor did I have any illusions about why we were doing what we were doing. It was all too possible that, come tomorrow, we'd all die a horrible death, consumed by a monster black hole. But there was little we could do about that at the moment except celebrate what might be the last hours of our lives.

Eventually, though, there came a point when the jug was empty. By then, Ash's voice was nothing more than a slur, his fingers clumsy upon the strings. I was seeing double and Rain had collapsed against my shoulder; it was plain that none of us would be able to stay awake much longer. Wincing against the dull throb in my head, I stumbled to my feet, pulling Rain with me. Ash was falling asleep in his hammock as we found our way to the door.

Half-carrying Rain, I hobbled down the corridor, heading for my cabin. Rain woke up a little as I opened the door. "Uhh . . . hold it, this's where I get off," she muttered. "Gotta go thataway . . . my room."

"Sure, sure." Yet I was reluctant to let her go. Perhaps I was stinking drunk, but nonetheless I was all too aware that there was a pretty girl draped across my shoulders. "But, y'know, y'know . . . I mean, y'know. . . ."

That seemed to wake her up a little more. "Oh, no," she said, gently prying herself away from me. "Don't you start. Not th' . . . this's not th' time or th' . . ."

"Place," I finished, and that gave her the giggles. "Whatever, sure, but . . ." I stopped and gazed at her. "If not now, then when . . . ?"

"Nuther time, maybe, but not . . ." She shook her head. This nearly caused her to lose her balance, so she grabbed my arm to steady herself. Somehow, my hands fell to her hips, and for a moment there was a look in her eyes that seemed as if she was reconsidering my unspoken proposition. But then she pushed herself away from me again.

"Definitely not now," she finished.

Despite all the booze I'd put away, I was still sober enough to remember the definition of the word *no*. "Yeah, s'okay. . ."

Rain leaned forward and, raising herself on tip-toes, gave me a kiss. Her mouth was soft and warm, and tasted of bearshine. "Get us through this," she whispered, "and maybe we'll see about it."

And then she wheeled away from me. I watched her go, realizing that I'd just been given another reason to live.

## SEVENTEEN

*Eye of the monster . . . a fine time . . . nice place to visit, but et cetera . . . root hog or die.*

### IV

Fourteen hours later, Rain and I were on our way to Kha-Zann.

By then, I'd sobered up enough to climb into *Lucy's* cockpit. Knowing that he'd have a drunk aboard his ship, Ted had made sure that the med bay was stocked with plenty of morning-after pills, eye drops, and antioxidant patches; finally I knew why Ash had been able to recover from his binges so quickly. Two each of the former and one of the latter, along with hot coffee and a cold sponge bath, and I was ready to fly.

Rain met me in the ready room. She didn't mention the inebriated pass I'd made at her the night before, but I couldn't help noticing the way she blushed when I suggested that we save time by suiting up together. She declined with the polite excuse that she wanted to double-check her gear before putting it on. I didn't argue, but instead suited up by myself. I worried that I might have damaged our friendship, but there were more important matters to deal with just then.

Over the course of the last sixteen hours, Aerik had steadily grown larger. Through the starboard portholes, the superjovian appeared as an enormous blue shield, its upper atmosphere striated by thin white cirrus clouds. By the time I'd slugged down my third or fourth cup of coffee, Kha-Zann had become visible as a reddish-brown orb in trojan orbit a little less than a million miles from its primary. We couldn't make out Kasi-masta just yet, though; it was still on the opposite side of Aerik from the *Pride*, and no one aboard would be able to see it until the ship initiated the maneuvers that would swing it around the planet's far side.

Yet we were all too aware that the Annihilator was coming. I had just put on my headset when Ted informed me that the sensors had picked up

a slight disturbance in Aerik's gravity well, coming from an unseen source approximately twelve million miles away. That sounded too far away to worry about, until the skipper reminded me that Kasimasta was traveling at four hundred miles per second. According to Ali's calculations, the black hole would reach Kha-Zann in little more than eight hours . . . which meant that Rain and I hadn't much time to waste.

Fortunately, we didn't have to cycle through the airlock on the way out. Doc was waiting for us at the shuttle airlock; he insisted on giving our suits a quick check-out, but I think he'd really come down from the bridge to wish us good luck. Just before I climbed through the hatch, he produced a rabbit's foot on a keychain, which he claimed had been in his family for three generations. I really didn't want the mangy thing, but Doc was adamant about me taking it along, so I let him clip it to the zipper of my left shoulder pocket. A solemn handshake for me, a kiss on the cheek for Rain, and then the chief pronounced us fit to travel.

Doc had just shut the hatch behind us when we heard the muffled clang of two bells. Ali was about to commence the rollover maneuver that would precede the deceleration burn. So Rain and I hustled into the cockpit; we'd just strapped ourselves into our seats when we felt the abrupt cessation of g-force, signaling that the main engine had been cut off. As I began to power up the shuttle, there was the swerving sensation of the *Pride* doing a one-eighty on its short axis. Emily's voice came over the comlink; a quick run-through of the checklist, and when everything came up green we went straight into a thirty-second countdown.

*Loose Lucy* detached from the docking collar, and for a few moments the *Pride* seemed to hang motionless just outside the cockpit windows. Then I fired the RCS to ease us away from the ship, and our respective velocities changed; in the blink of an eye, the big freighter was gone, with little more than a last glimpse of its forward deflector array. From the seat beside me, Rain sighed; a couple of tiny bubbles that might have been tears drifted away from the open faceplate of her helmet, but I didn't say anything about them.

As soon as the *Pride* was gone, I used the pitch and yaw thrusters to turn *Lucy* around. Once she was pointed in the right direction, I switched to autopilot and fired up the main engine. A muted rumble pushed us back in our seats; a few seconds of that, then the engine cut off and we were on the road to Kha-Zann.

Rain and I had decided we'd remain on cabin pressure until just before we were ready to make touchdown, at which point we would close our helmets and void the cabin. That way we'd save a little time by not having to cycle through the airlock once we were on the ground. We'd also been careful not to have any solid food for breakfast or lunch; our suits' recycling systems would get a good workout, but at least our diapers would remain clean. And we'd stuffed our pockets with stim tabs and caffeine pills; maybe we'd be too wired to sleep once we returned to the *Pride*, but at least we wouldn't doze off on this mission.

So she and I had thought of everything. Or at least we believed we had. Even so, nothing could have prepared us for our first sight of Kasimasta.

I had just removed my helmet and was bending over to stow it beneath

my seat when Rain gasped. Looking up, I noticed she was staring past me out the windows. I turned my head, and for a moment all I saw was Aerik, which by then had swelled to almost fill the portside windows. Impressive, but . . .

Then I saw what she'd seen, and felt my heart go cold. Coming into view from behind the limb of the planet was something that, at first glance, resembled an enormous eye. Red-rimmed, as if irritated by something caught in the cloudy white mass of its pupil, it wept a vast tear that seemed to fall away into space. Altogether, it resembled the baleful glare of an angry god.

So this was Kasimasta: a cyclops among the stars. Although still several million miles away, it was awesome, and utterly terrifying. The black hole at its nucleus was invisible to us, surrounded by the ionized gas that made up its ergosphere, but we knew that it was there, just as we knew that nothing could survive an encounter with the ring of dust and debris that swirled at sublight velocities around its outer event horizon.

As we watched, Kasimasta slowly moved toward the cockpit's center window . . . and stayed there. *Loose Lucy* was taking us straight toward the moon that lay between us and it. I had an impulse to disengage the autopilot, turn the shuttle around, and flee for . . . well, anywhere but there. An insane notion; there was no way *Lucy* could catch up with the *Pride*, just as it would be impossible to outrun the monster before it caught up with us. Like it or not, we were committed.

For a minute or so, neither of us said anything. Then we found ourselves reaching out to take hold of each other's hand. Despite the fact that I hadn't wanted her to come along, I suddenly realized I was glad Rain was here.

Yeah. I'd picked a fine time to fall in love.

## V

For a moon on the verge of destruction, Kha-Zann was strangely beautiful. As *Lucy* closed in upon it, we looked down upon a world that somewhat resembled a miniature version of Mars, save for a noticeable lack of polar ice caps. A reddish-brown surface, streaked here and there with dark grey veins, whose cratered terrain was split and cracked by labyrinthine networks of crevices, fissures, and canyons. Early morning sunlight reflected off a thin, low-lying haze that quickly dissipated as the day grew longer, with shadows stretching out from crater rims and bumpy hills. Probably an interesting place to explore, if one had time to do so.

But we weren't there to take pictures and hunt for souvenirs. In fact, all I really wanted to do was drop in, drop off, and drop out. So once we were a couple of hundred miles away, I picked out what looked like a low-risk landing site near the daylight terminator—a broad, flat plain just north of the equator, away from any valleys and relatively clear of large craters—then switched off the autopilot and took control of my craft again.

By then, Rain and I had put our helmets on again; once we were breathing suit air, she vented the cabin. A final cinch of our harnesses to

make sure that they were secure, then I turned the shuttle around and initiated the landing sequence. As we'd been told, Kha-Zann didn't have much in the way of an atmosphere; there was some chop as *Lucy* began to make her descent, and an orange corona grew up from around the heat shield. But it quickly faded, and after a few seconds the turbulence ended and we had a smooth ride down.

Even so, my hands were moist within my gloves as I clutched the yoke. Sure, I had plenty of experience landing on the Moon and Mars, but never had I expected to touch down on a world ninety light-years from home. Even putting down on Coyote in a stolen lifeboat wasn't as butt-clenching as this. Maybe it was because I was landing where no one—or at least no human—had ever gone before. Or maybe it was simply because I was all too aware that, if I screwed up, my life wouldn't be the only one placed in jeopardy.

In any case, my attention never left the instrument panel, and I kept a sharp eye on the aft cams and the eightball all the way down. Rain helped by reciting the altimeter readout, but it wasn't until *Lucy* was six hundred feet above the ground and I was certain that there were no surprises waiting for us at the touchdown point that I lowered the landing gear and throttled up the engine for final descent.

We landed with little more than a hard thump, but I didn't breathe easy until I'd safed the engine and put all systems on standby. Through the windows, the dust we'd kicked up was already beginning to settle, revealing a barren landscape beneath a dark purple sky. We'd landed in the last hour of the afternoon, on the side of Kha-Zann that still faced the sun; to the east, just beyond the short horizon, Aerik was beginning to rise. Kasi-masta was nowhere to be seen, but I knew that the Annihilator would soon make its appearance.

"Okay, no time for sightseeing." I unbuckled my harness. "Let's do this and get out of here."

"Really? No kidding." Rain was already out of her seat. "*I sort of thought we could look for a nice place to build a house.*"

If I'd been listening a little more carefully to what she'd just said, I might have given her a double-take. Perhaps she was only being sarcastic, but it might have been a serious proposition. The only plans I had for us were no more than a couple of hours in the future, so my response was nothing more than a distracted grunt as I followed her from the cockpit.

In Earth-normal gravity, the probe probably weighed about two hundred pounds; on Kha-Zann, though, it was only one-fifth of that. The case was bulky, though, so it took both of us to load it aboard the elevator. Once it was securely lashed to the pallet, I opened the cargo hatch. The doors creaked softly as they parted, and a handful of red sand, caught upon an errant breeze, drifted into the hold. I used the elevator controls to rotate the T-bar of the overhead crane into position, then I turned to Rain.

"You know how to operate this, right?" I pointed to the joystick. "Up for up, down for down, and it stops in the middle. Take it easy when you lower me, though, because I don't want to . . ."

"*You're not going down there.*" She shook her head within her helmet. "*I am. You're staying here.*"

"No, you're not. This is my job. You're . . ."

"Jules . . ."

"We don't have time for this. One of us needs to stay behind to run the elevator. You're the cargo master, so that's you. End of discussion." I paused. "If I get into any trouble down there, I'll tell you . . . but I should be able to handle this by myself. Just do your job, and with any luck we'll be out of here before the engines cool down. All right?"

Before she had a chance to argue any further, I stepped into the cage. I suppose I should have been impressed by Rain's willingness to accept the risk, but I was stronger than her, and it would take muscles to manhandle the crate from the elevator and haul it a safe distance from the shuttle. She pouted for another moment or so, but surrendered to the inevitable. Once I'd grabbed hold of the hand rails on either side of the cage, I gave her a nod, and Rain pushed the levers that raised the cage from its resting position and telescoped the T-bar through the hatch.

The breeze was a little stiffer than I'd expected. The cage gently rocked back and forth on its cables, and I held on tight and planted my boots firmly against the pallet. Once the crane was extended to its full length, I told Rain to lower away. The cage shuddered and jerked a bit on the way down, but I didn't worry much about it; the elevator had a load capacity of one and a half tons. It was just the wind giving me a hassle.

It only took a couple of minutes to reach the ground. As soon as the cage touched down, I untied the crate and, taking hold of its handles, picked it up and carried it off the elevator. Even in the lesser gravity, the crate was just heavy enough to make it hard work; if I hadn't been burdened with it, I might have been able to bunny-hop across the desert floor. As it was, though, I found it was just as easy to put the crate down, then pick up one end by its handle and drag it behind me.

"What's it like down there?" Rain asked.

I stopped to look up at her. She was standing in the open hatch, watching me from above. "Like Kansas," I replied, "only without cornfields. Ever been there?"

A short laugh. "You kidding? I've never even been to Earth."

I'd forgotten that. "I'll take you sometime. To Earth, I mean . . . believe me, you can skip Kansas." I started to pick up the case again, then paused. "Hey, if you're not doing anything, patch into the long-range com and see if you can reach the *Pride*. They might be back in range by now."

"Wilco." There was a click as she switched from one band to another. Not waiting for a response, I went back to work.

The terrain was rough, its coarse sand strewn with rocks the size of baseballs. Every so often I'd have to veer around boulders or haul the crate through small pits formed by micrometeorite impacts. Through my helmet, I could hear the faint moan of the wind; the atmosphere wasn't dense enough to hold up a kite, but I still had to use my free hand to clear silt from my faceplate.

It took about fifteen minutes to drag the crate nearly a hundred yards from the shuttle; I figured that was far enough to keep the probe from being damaged by *Lucy's* exhaust flare once we lifted off. I checked the chronometer on my heads-up display; we'd been on Kha-Zann for just



over half an hour, so time was getting short. I opened the crate and tossed away the lid, then reached inside. The probe wasn't hard to remove; a couple of hard tugs at its rungs, and it came straight out of its packing material.

"No word from the *Pride* yet," Rain said, "but that's probably because I'm getting a lot of static. How are you doing out there?"

"Almost done." I grunted as I carried the sphere a few feet from the crate, then gently placed it on the ground. It rolled a couple of inches, forcing me to roll it back so that its top hexagon was positioned right-side up. Once I was satisfied that it wasn't going anywhere, I pressed the blue button on the control hex.

The button lit up, but nothing happened. I waited a second, uncertain whether or not the thing was working, then I pushed the red button. This time, the reaction was immediate; the panels surrounding the lower hemisphere sprang open, and small multijointed legs unfolded from within the sphere, their horseshoe-like pads firmly anchoring the probe against the ground.

I pushed the white button, and had to jump back quickly to avoid the rest of the panels as they peeled apart to reveal a smaller sphere hidden inside. From the probe's core, a narrow cylinder raised itself upon a stalk, then unfurled to become a dish antenna. The hyperlink transmitter, no doubt. As it swiveled around to point toward the sun, two more cylinders rose into view; judging from the lenses at their ends, I figured they were multispectrum cameras. One of them rotated toward me, and I took another step back. Realizing that it looked straight at me, I restrained an impulse to wave at whomever might be watching. Or perhaps give them an obscene gesture.

A slender wand shot out from the core, then buried itself in the sand; that must be the seismometer. And meanwhile, valves opened and fluttered, wands were elevated, lights began to flash. It was like some weird toy that belonged to an equally weird kid.

"Jules . . ."

"Wow." I stared at the probe in amazement. "You should see this thing. It's like some kind of . . ."

"Jules . . . look up."

Something in Rain's voice gave me a chill. Turning around, I raised my eyes toward the sky, and immediately forgot about the probe.

While I'd been busy hauling the crate out into the desert and deploying the probe, the sun had begun to set. Aerik had fully risen into view, but that wasn't what got my attention. It was *Kasimasta*.

I couldn't see all of the *Annihilator*, but what I could was enough to freeze my blood. The edge of its accretion belt was coming up over the horizon, with the nimbus of its ergosphere just behind it. The damned thing was four or five times larger than when we'd first seen it, and no longer looked like an eye, but rather the storm front of a hurricane mightier than the wrath of God.

And it was heading straight toward us.

"Hell with this." I forced myself to breathe. "We're outta here." And then I turned and began to high-tail it back to *Lucy*.

## VI

No longer encumbered by the crate, there was nothing to prevent me from bunny-hopping. The gravity and atmospheric pressure were just low enough for me to make broad jumps that covered five or six feet at a time, just as I learned to do in Academy basic training on the Moon. Yet I hadn't covered half the distance between the probe and the shuttle when I went sprawling face-first across the ground.

Under other circumstances, it might have been funny. Spacer fall down, go boom. And my reflexes were good; I managed to raise my arms and cover my helmet faceplate before it was cracked open by a rock. But nonetheless, I knew at once that this was no mere accident; I hadn't tripped over anything, nor had my last jump been misguided.

The ground had moved beneath my feet.

I was picking myself up when I felt it again, a mild tremor that caused the sand beneath my hands and knees to shift ever so slightly. At that instant, Rain's voice came to me through my headset: "*Jules, get back here! We're getting. . . !*"

"Earthquakes. I know." I struggled erect, continued running toward the shuttle. Fortunately it had remained stable, its landing gear still firmly resting upon the ground. I knew, though, that if the tremors became much more violent, there was a good chance the craft would be rocked so hard that one of its legs might snap . . . in which case, we wouldn't be leaving Kha-Zann.

Rain remained at her post until I reached the elevator; I'd barely climbed aboard when she put the crane in reverse and began to haul me back upstairs. The wind had picked up as well; I had to hold on tight as the cage swung back and forth, and I didn't feel safe until it reached the top and she'd retracted the T-bar into the hold. Yet that safety was little more than temporary; we had to get off Kha-Zann PDQ.

While Rain stayed below to shut the hatch and lock everything down, I scrambled up to the cockpit and got *Lucy* ready to fly. I'd just powered up the engine when she joined me on the flight deck. No time for a prelaunch checklist; I did my best to make sure I hadn't neglected anything, but even as we were strapping ourselves in, another tremor passed through the hull, this one violent enough to scare me into thinking that the ship was about to topple over.

Rain felt it, too. Her eyes were wide on the other side of her faceplate. "*Jules. . .*"

"Hang on, sweetie. We're gone." And then I fired the engine.

Launch was more difficult than landing. By then the wind had picked up sufficient speed that, if I had been attempting to lift off from Mars, the ground controller would've probably called a scrub. But I didn't have the luxury of waiting for optimal weather conditions; no choice, in fact, but to root hog or die. So I kept the engine at full throttle all the way up and gripped the yoke with both hands as *Lucy* clawed her way into the sky, her hull plates creaking ominously with every bump and jolt she took.

In less than a minute, though, it was all over. The sky darkened, purple turning jet black; the rattle faded away and everything smoothed out. On the screens, the aft cams captured a brief glimpse of Kha-Zann falling

away, our landing site no longer visible. Then the moon disappeared somewhere behind us and we were back in space.

Rain let out her breath. "*Nice flying, pilot,*" she murmured. "*If I wasn't wearing this thing, I'd give you a kiss.*"

"Save it for later." I was still on manual, but since we were through the rough patch, I throttled down the engines and engaged the autopilot. "See if you can raise the *Pride*. We should be able to get her by now."

"*Right.*" She reached over to the com panel, patched us into the long-range relay. "*Loose Lucy to Pride of Cucamonga, do you copy?*"

A moment of static, then Emily's voice came over: "*We copy, Lucy. What took you so long?*"

I almost laughed out loud. "Sorry 'bout that, *Pride*. Had a bit of a . . ." I stopped myself. "Never mind. Mission accomplished and we're off the ground. That's all that counts. What's your position?"

A brief pause, then Ted came online. "*We're on course for the rendezvous point, same coordinates as before. ETA in forty-seven minutes. Think you can make it?*"

"Hold on." I finished reloading the program, then checked the comp display. Everything was copasetic; we'd arrive with just enough time and fuel to spare. "Roger that. We're on the beam and on our way for pickup."

"*Very good. We'll see you there.*" Another pause. "*Good work, guys. And, by the way . . . Mr. Goldstein has asked me to extend his compliments.*"

"*Oh, how lovely,*" Rain muttered. "*Be still, my beating heart.*"

"*Repeat, please? I'm afraid we have some interference.*"

"*Negatory, Pride.* Just some static. *Lucy* over and out." I made the kill sign, and grinned at Rain once she'd switched off. "What do you want to bet Morgan gives you the pink slip for that?"

"*Ask me if I . . .*" Her voice trailed off as she gazed toward the starboard side. "*Oh, god. . .*"

I looked past her, and was suddenly grateful for having had the foresight to wear diapers. *Kasimasta* filled the windows. Its accretion belt resembled a whirlpool of colored dyes, its ergosphere as bright as a star. Now that it had entered *Aerik's* orbit, the *Annihilator's* gravity well was beginning to affect the planet itself. *Aerik's* night side was turned toward the rogue, and even from the distance we could see brilliant flashes of lightning within its darkened skies, like the death throes of a swarm of fireflies, while the blue clouds of its daylight side seemed to writhe and roil in agony.

But that wasn't all. *Aerik* was no longer a perfect sphere; its equator was showing a pronounced bulge, as if it were a massive balloon that was being squeezed at its poles. As I watched, a wispy stream of blue-white haze slowly began to move outward from the planet's upper atmosphere. *Kasimasta* wasn't just a killer; it was a vampire, the vast mouth of its singularity drawing blood from its latest victim in the form of hydrogen and helium. *Kha-Zann* would be little more than an appetizer for such a voracious appetite.

It was hard to be sure, but I guessed that *Kasimasta* was about a half-million miles away. Way too close for comfort. I fought the impulse to throttle up the engine. Our rendezvous window had been calculated with pre-

cious little margin for error; if we arrived too early, we would miss *Pride* just as surely as if we'd been marooned on Kha-Zann. I couldn't afford to take that chance; like it or not, I'd have to place my faith in Ali's calculations.

The next forty minutes were the longest in my life. There was nothing for us to do except wait for *Lucy* to intercept the *Pride*. If I'd brought a deck of cards, I might have broken them out and had a few hands of poker with Rain; as things stood, though, we could only stay on the lookout for our ship.

I was just beginning to regret not having written my last will and testament—not that I had much to bequeath anyone—when the lidar beeped; something was coming within range. A minute later, a tiny cruciform appeared through the starboard windows, its shape outlined by the red and green flashes of its formation lights. Rain and I were still whooping it up when Emily's voice came over the radio.

"Pride to Lucy, do you copy?"

Rain toggled the com, then nodded to me. "Affirmative, *Pride*," I said. "Great to see you again." A quick glance at the nav panel. "On course for rendezvous and docking."

"Roger that." Now we heard from Ted. "*Ready to match course and velocity.*"

"Copy." I disengaged the autopilot one last time, then put my hands back on the yoke. Next was the tricky part. Although the *Pride* had cut its thrust, its momentum was still such that *Lucy* would have to run hard in order to catch up with it. I'd have to expand the last of our fuel in order to do so.

But if all went well, it wouldn't matter. And if it didn't go so well . . .

I pushed that out of my mind. Keeping my eyes fixed on the instrument panels, I kicked up the engine, coaxing the shuttle closer to the rendezvous point. The next few minutes were as harrowing as any in my life, but when I looked up again, it seemed as though the *Pride* were hanging motionless directly before us, its docking collar a big, fat bull's-eye that a rookie couldn't have missed.

I was just about to let out a sigh of relief when Doc's voice came over the com. "*Jules, is your cabin still depressurized?*"

"Roger that." I'd been too busy to think about that. "Want us to pressurize?"

"Affirmative. *I'll be waiting for you at the airlock. Over.*"

"Copy. Over." I glanced at Rain. "What do you think that's all about?"

"*Guess he wants to save time by not having us cycle through.*" She reached up to the environmental control panel. "*I'll handle this. Just keep your eyes on the road.*"

She needn't have worried. A few final squirts of the thrusters, and a couple of minutes later there was the welcome jolt of the docking flanges connecting. I shut down the engine and major systems, then reached forward to pat the instrument panel.

"Thank you, sweetheart," I whispered. "You're a good girl."

I didn't know it then, but those were my last words to *Lucy*. Doc was waiting for us at the airlock, just as he said he'd be. As soon as we were aboard, he slammed the hatch shut behind us.

"Sorry, Jules," he said, unable to look me in the eye, "but we're going to have to ditch her."

"What?" Rain and I had already removed our helmets; I gaped at him, not believing what I'd just heard. "Why do you . . . ?"

"Skipper's orders. We can't spare the extra mass, so . . ."

I was about to argue with him when Ted's voice came over my headset. "*Jules! Get up here now! We've got an emergency!*"

## EIGHTEEN

*Never piss off a turtle . . . faster than dirt . . . doomsday . . . what's harder than flying a spaceship?*

### VII

I headed straight for the bridge, leaving Rain behind to help Doc jettison *Lucy*. There wasn't enough time to pay last respects; I'd grieve for the loss of my ride later, if and when we survived. Ted hadn't told me what had happened, and he didn't need to: when the captain says jump, everyone makes like a frog.

I was halfway up the access shaft before I realized that I was still using the hand rails. If we were in zero-g, that meant the ship was still coasting. Now that Rain and I were safely back aboard, though, the main engine should have been on fire and *Pride* should have been at full thrust. I was trying to figure this out when the bridge hatch slammed open and Emily came through, her left arm curled around something that, at first glance, looked like a bundle of clothes upon which someone had spilled ketchup.

"Make a hole!" she yelled. "Coming through!"

I flattened myself against the shaft as much as possible; hard to do, since I was still wearing my EVA gear. When she got closer, I saw that the object in tow was a person: Ali Youssef, unconscious, with a blood-stained shirt wrapped around his chest as a makeshift bandage.

"What the hell . . . ?"

"Jas attacked him." Emily squeezed past me, using her free hand to grasp the rails. "No time to explain. Get up top . . . Ted needs you to take the helm." I couldn't get anything more out of her, though, because she continued to haul Ali down to Deck Three, no doubt taking him to the med bay. She glanced back at me, saw that I'd frozen. "Move!"

That snapped me out of it. Hand over hand, I scrambled the rest of the way up the shaft. The hatch was still open; I sailed headfirst through the manhole, nearly spraining my wrist as I grabbed a ceiling rail to brake myself. Ted was on the other side of the console, floating next to the helm station. He was bare-chested, and I realized that it was his shirt Ali was wearing as a chest bandage.

"Come here and take over." He didn't raise his voice, nor did he need to. "Course is already laid in . . . you just need to take the stick."

I was wondering why he hadn't done so himself when I saw the stun gun in his right hand, and that he was using it to cover Mahamatasja Jas

Sa-Fhadda. The Prime Emissary was backed against hisher couch; heshe was still wearing hisher weapon around hisher wrist. Behind himher, Morgan Goldstein cowered against the bulkhead; for once he was speechless, apparently terrified by whatever had just happened.

"Skipper, what...?"

"Just do it." Ted grabbed a ceiling rail and pulled himself toward the engineering station, carefully keeping his distance from Jas. "I'll watch Jas. Just..."

"I assure you, Captain, I mean you no harm." The voice that emerged from Jas's environment suit was higher-pitched than I'd heard before. "I was only defending myself. Mr. Youssef..."

"Shut up." Ted didn't take his eyes from himher. "Jules..."

"I'm on it." Suspended within the holo tank was an image of Kasimasta; one glance told me the Annihilator was way too close to our own position. Pushing myself off the bulkhead, I sailed straight through the miniature black hole, an irony that might have been poetic if I'd been in the mood for such a thing. Just then, though, my main concern was taking control of the helm and getting us away from the annihilator.

I grabbed hold of Ali's seat and shoved it back as far as I could. Since I was still wearing my suit, there was no way I could sit down, so instead I anchored myself by shoving the toes of my boots within the foot rail below the console. Bending over the console, I quickly studied the comp readouts. They confirmed what Ted had told me; our course was set, and all I needed to do was bring the ship around, point it in the right direction, and fire the main engine.

Silently thanking Ali for having shown me how to operate the helm, I pulled off my gloves, tossed them aside, and rested my right hand on the trackball. A faint tremor passed through the ship as I carefully rotated the ball, firing maneuvering thrusters until the *Pride* was brought back into proper trim. Once the *x*, *y*, and *z* axes were aligned, I locked in the heading, then flipped back the cover of the ignition key. No time to sound general quarters; I'd just have to hope that everyone below was holding onto something.

"Main engine ignition, on your mark," I said, glancing up at Ted.

"Mark." He didn't take his eyes from Jas.

A deep breath, and then I turned the key. Green lights flashed across the console as the hull gently shuddered. I took hold of the thrust control bar and pushed it forward, and the shudder became a smooth, steady vibration. An invisible hand tried to push me over; nothing I could do about that now, though, except adjust my stance, hang onto the edge of the console, and not let the *g*-force make me fall down.

For the moment, it seemed as though everything was fine. Then there was a sudden jolt, as if something had hit the ship from behind. An instant later, there was a gentle rattle against the outer hull, almost as if we'd run into sleet. I glanced up at the overhead screen where the view from the aft cam was displayed, and what I saw nearly gave me a heart attack. Kasimasta completely filled the screen, the vast band of its accretion belt rushing toward us. What we'd just felt was its bow shock; the rattle was the sound of sand and dust hitting the ship.



"Ted!" I snapped. "The deflector. . .!"

"Got it." He reached down to adjust the forward deflector, turning it up to full intensity. The rattle subsided as the field expanded to clear a path for us, but it didn't do anything for Kasimasta's gravity well. The *Pride* was shaking like a tree limb caught in the wind; all around us, I could hear deck plates groaning. If only the main engine had been fired sooner . . .

No time to worry about that now. The ship was just a few seconds away from being pulled into the accretion belt. Whatever we were going to do, we needed to do it fast.

I prodded my headset. "Rain, are you and Doc ready to detach *Lucy*?"

"Roger that. Inner hatch sealed, outer hatch still open, cradle and docking collar disengaged."

I looked at Ted again. He nodded, then snapped a pair of switches, and an instant later there was a hard kick from the port side as *Loose Lucy* was jettisoned. Now I understood why Doc had insisted that we repressurize the cabin; the blowout helped knock the shuttle away from the ship.

"Sorry, *Lucy*," I muttered. "You were a good old bird."

Ted glanced at me. He said nothing, but his face was grim. We'd lightened our load by a couple of hundred tons, but even that wouldn't be enough to save us. One way or another, we had to find a way to outrun Kasimasta.

All at once, I figured out how to do it . . . and found myself grinning. Raising my eyes from the controls, I looked across the compartment at Morgan. "Say, Mr. Goldstein . . . how much would you give me to save your life?"

He stared back at me. "What?"

"You heard what I said. How much would you give me to . . .?"

"Anything!" He couldn't believe that this was a matter open to discussion. "Whatever you want . . . just do it!"

"Thank you." I looked at Ted again. "How about you, skipper? Anything you'd like from Mr. Goldstein in exchange for his life?"

For a second, Ted gaped at me as if I'd just lost my mind. Then he caught on. "Sure," he said, his right hand creeping across the engineering console. "I can think of one or two . . ."

"For God's sakes!" Morgan glanced at the nearest window. "Whatever you want, you can have it. Just hurry . . .!"

"Very well, then." Ted rested his fingertips on a pair of switches, then snapped them. "Jettisoning cargo modules."

If Morgan had any objections—and I had no doubt that he did—they were lost in the warning alarm of the emergency pyros being fired. Two hard thumps, and Cargo One and Cargo Two were decoupled from the hub. I glanced up at the screens in time to see two massive cylinders tumble away from the ship, taking with them forty crates of alien knick-knacks.

Morgan stared in horror as his payload fell toward Kasimasta. For something that he'd once derided as all but worthless, he certainly seemed upset by their sacrifice. He didn't seem to notice the abrupt change of velocity as the *Pride*, having shed nearly one-fourth its mass,

surged forward. Leave it to a businessman to put a higher value on his merchandise than his own life.

I held my breath as I watched my instruments. The delta-V was steadily increasing, just as I thought it would. Another brief tremor as the *Pride* crossed the bow shock once more, and then we were racing away from Kasimasta, accelerating beyond reach of its accretion belt.

The ship stopped shaking, and I slowly let out my breath. "I think we're going to make it," I murmured, then I looked over at Ted. "Now . . . would someone mind telling me why I'm here?"

Ted wiped sweat from his forehead. "Ali lost his temper and attacked Jas, and Jas shot him. That's pretty much it, in a nutshell."

"For the love of . . ." I'd seen this coming, sure, but nonetheless I couldn't believe it. "Why?"

"Heshe said that we should have left you behind, made a run for it to save ourselves." Ted glared at Jas. "Perhaps that's something the hjadd do, Prime Emissary," he added, his voice rising in anger, "but we humans have a slightly higher standard."

"It was only an observation, Captain." Jas settled into hiser couch. "Nothing more. I did not expect your pilot to react so violently."

"Yes, well . . . your own reaction left something to be desired." Ted looked at Morgan. "Mr. Goldstein . . . Morgan . . . if you're through crying over spilled milk, you can make yourself useful and disarm your friend."

Morgan's eyes widened. "I can't . . ."

"Yes, you will . . . or I'll be tempted to lessen our load by a few more kilos." Ted hefted the stunner. "Glad I had this squirreled away. Never thought I'd actually have to use it, though."

I nodded, but said nothing. Although it wasn't standard operating procedure, ship captains often concealed a sidearm somewhere aboard the bridge, in the event of mutiny or a possible hijack attempt. Such occurrences were so rare, most spacers considered them unlikely. This time, though, I was glad my CO had erred on the side of caution.

Morgan hesitated, then turned to Jas. The Prime Emissary had already removed hiser bracelet; heshe pushed something on its side that might have been a safety catch, then surrendered the weapon to Morgan. "My most profound apologies, Captain. It was never my intent to put this ship in danger."

"Right." Ted stood up and walked over to Morgan, who reluctantly gave the bracelet to him. "Now go below to your cabin. I'll summon you once we rendezvous with the starbridge." The Prime Emissary rose from hiser seat, started toward the manhole. "And Jas . . . next time we jump, no tricks."

Jas said nothing, but hiser head briefly moved back and forth in the hjadd affirmative. Then heshe disappeared down the access shaft, with Morgan behind him/her. Ted watched them go, then sighed as he dropped the bracelet on the seat behind him.

"God, what a nightmare." He shoved the stunner into his belt, then massaged his eyes with his fingertips. "If I ever let an alien aboard this ship again . . ."

"You and me both." Then I chuckled. "Hey . . . trade you a spacesuit for a shirt."

Ted looked at me, and a wry grin slowly appeared on his face. "Go on, get out of here." Going over to the helm, he pulled up the seat and sat down. "I'll stand watch . . . but just do me one favor."

"What's that?"

He rubbed at the goose pimples on his arms. "Fetch me another shirt. I'm freezing."

## VIII

I went below to the ready room and got out of my suit, then went up to Deck Three and dropped by the med bay to check on Ali. Emily was still with him; she'd managed to carry our pilot to the autodoc, where she'd placed him on the table and activated the system. When I found her, she was standing outside the surgical cell, gazing through the window as the 'bot's insectile hands stitched the wounds in Ali's chest. He was kept sedated, with a gas mask over his face and IV lines feeding fluids into his veins.

"He caught four darts," Emily said, motioning to a small kidney tray on the stand next to the table. "Lucky they didn't have enough forward velocity to pierce the rib cage, or he'd be dead by now."

I peered at the tray. Within it were four bloodstained flechettes, each no larger than a fingernail yet razor sharp. Apparently human bones were a little tougher than a hjadd's, because a couple of them looked as if they had fractured upon impact. Still, it was enough to make my blood turn cold. "And Jas shot him because. . . ?"

"Ali wiggled out when Jas said that you and Rain should've been left behind. Happened right after you docked." Emily sighed, shook her head. "I know, I know. It's stupid, but . . . guess the pressure finally got to him." I nodded, regretting the fact that I'd neglected to mention Ash's warning to anyone. Stupid of me not to take him more seriously. "At any rate," she went on, "I'm just glad you made it back in time to take over the helm."

"Yeah, well . . . so am I." I looked around the med bay. "Where's Rain?"

"Don't know. Maybe in her cabin. She looked pretty beat." She glanced at me. "How did it go down there?"

"Piece of cake." I was too tired to talk about it; just then, all I really wanted to do was get a shirt for Ted, then have something to eat and maybe catch a few winks. I looked at Ali once more. "How long do you think it'll be until he's up and about?"

"Not soon enough for him to do his job again, if that's what you're asking." Emily smiled, patted my shoulder. "Don't fret about it. Ted and I will take turns at the helm until you've had a chance to recuperate."

I thanked her, then left the med bay and went up to Deck Two. A quick stop by Ted's cabin to grab a shirt from his bag, then I headed for the access shaft again . . . but not before I stopped at Rain's quarters. The cabin door was shut. I lingered outside for a moment, considering whether or not I should knock, before deciding that I owed her a nap. I hadn't seen Ash since we'd returned, but his cabin was quiet as well. I figured that he'd probably passed out again.

Ted was still at the helm when I returned to the bridge. He was grateful for the shirt, but said that he didn't need to have me take over just yet.

I went back down to Deck Two, where I made myself some lunch in the wardroom. I was about halfway through a tomato and cheese sandwich when the door slammed open and Morgan barged in.

"Who do you think you are, jettisoning those modules without my permission?"

I took my time swallowing what was in my mouth before answering him, "You're welcome."

That brought him up short. "What?"

"Oh, I'm sorry . . . I thought you'd come to thank me." I pushed aside the rest of my sandwich. "I asked what you'd give for me to save your life. You said anything, and I assumed that would include the cargo." I picked up a napkin and wiped my mouth. "Silly me. Didn't know you thought gnoshes were more important than your skin."

Morgan scowled at me. "That was completely unnecessary. We could've gotten away without . . ."

"Probably not. Once we shed the extra mass, the ship was able to reach escape velocity . . . but not before then." I wadded up the napkin and pitched it at the disposal chute, and got two points for a perfect shot. "Ask the skipper if you don't believe me. It was his decision, not mine."

Ted couldn't have picked a better moment to call. Morgan was still mustering a retort when my headset chirped. "*Jules, where are you right now?*"

"Wardroom," I replied. "Need me back up there?"

"*Negatory. Stay where you are, but turn on the monitors. I'm going to patch you into the aft cams . . . there's something you really ought to see.*"

Standing up from my chair, I reached up to switch on the flatscreens above the table . . . and promptly forgot how to breathe. Displayed on the screens was a departure angle view. With the cargo modules gone, the ship's stern was clearly visible, yet it wasn't that Ted wanted me to see.

Now that we'd put some distance between ourselves and Kasimasta, it once again resembled a cyclopean eye. Kha-Zann had disappeared, and a chill trickled down my back as I realized that the small world upon which I'd walked only a few hours earlier had been reduced to little more than dust and rubble. And now the Annihilator's angry glare was fixed upon Aerik.

The superjovian was no longer a distinct sphere, but rather a bauble at the end of an immense rope. Captured by the intense attraction of the rogue black hole, the planet was being pulled apart; a vast blue-white stream of gas flowed outward from what had once been its equator, curling across space to become part of Kasimasta's ever-expanding accretion belt. It was impossible to tell with the naked eye, but I didn't need the ship's sensors to know that Aerik's mass had already been reduced by half.

"Oh, my . . ." Morgan stared at the screens as if not quite believing the vast forces on display. "It's . . . it's . . ."

"Yup. Ain't it, though?" I pointed to the accretion belt. "See that? There's where you and I would be right now if we hadn't dumped the modules. Want to go back and look for them?"

Morgan didn't say a word, but the look in his eyes told me that he'd fi-

nally comprehended the fate we'd barely avoided. "Have a sandwich," I added, then I left the wardroom and headed for my cabin.

## IX

I slept like a stone for the next twelve hours or so, stirring only when I felt the shudder of maneuvering thrusters being fired to correct our course back to Nordash. When I finally woke up, it was to the sound of Ash's guitar coming through the air vent. I listened for a little while, letting my mind replay the events of the previous day, before deciding that I really should report back to the command center. With Ali down for the count, I'd become the *Pride's* de facto pilot; time to go topside and take over the helm again.

So I fell out of the sack and put on a fresh change of clothes. Ash was still noodling at his guitar when I left my cabin. I thought about dropping in, but changed my mind and instead went down the corridor to visit Rain. I hadn't seen or heard from her since we'd gotten back from Kha-Zann; she might want to talk about what we'd been through.

Her door was still shut, and there was no answer when I knocked. At first I thought she wasn't in, but when I tried the door, I found that it was locked from the inside. I knocked again, this time calling her name, but again there was no reply. I was beginning to get worried, so I headed back down the corridor, intending to inform Ted that Rain . . . well, I'm not sure what I would've told the captain, other than expressing vague misgivings about one of my crewmates . . . when Ash abruptly stopped playing his guitar.

"She doesn't want to talk to you," he said from behind the door of his cabin.

I started to say something, but again he beat me to it. "Seriously. She doesn't want to see you right now. If I were you, I'd leave her alone."

He already knew I was there, so I didn't bother to knock, but instead slid open his door. Ash was in his hammock, guitar lying across his chest. There were dark circles under his eyes, and I could tell from the absence of booze on his breath that he was sober.

"Been dry since yesterday," he said, in response to my unasked question. "That little party we had the other night pretty much pissed away the last of my supply." Ash idly strummed at his guitar. "That's why I'm staying away from you guys. Too many strong emotions right now . . . especially from you and her."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, c'mon." He looked at me askance. "Maybe you can hide from each other, or even from yourselves, but you can't hide from me. A lot has changed between the two of you, and . . ." He shook his head. "Go on, get out of here. Please. It hurts too damn much to be around you."

Perhaps I should've left him alone, but his comfort was the least of my concerns. "Sorry, Gordon," I said, closing the door behind me. "Can't do that. Not until you tell me what's going on."

Ash said nothing for a moment, then he let out his breath as a long sigh. "Y'know, it almost would've been easier if you guys had failed." Propping his guitar against the bulkhead, he sat up in his hammock, slinging

his legs over the side until his bare feet almost touched the floor. "In fact, I kinda thought that was what would happen. The shuttle would crash, or you'd miss the rendezvous . . . and that would've been it."

I stared at him, not quite believing I'd heard what he'd said. "Is that what you wanted?"

"Oh, no, no . . . not at all." He winced, perhaps from the second-hand impact of my emotions. "I'm happy you made it back, really I am. But—" he hesitated—"do you remember what she told you? When you suggested that she spend the night with you, I mean."

My face felt warm. "Ummm . . ."

"Right. And so does she . . . but the truth is, deep down inside, she really didn't think she'd have to make good on that promise." He forced a smile. "And then you had to screw things up and . . ."

"Yeah, okay, I get the picture." Then I shook my head. "No, I don't. I mean, that was something I did when I was drunk. She doesn't have to . . ."

"You know something, Jules? You talk too much. Just shut up and listen." Ash waited until he was sure that I wouldn't interrupt him again, then went on. "If you think you're confused . . . well, so is she, and even more so. If it were just about sex, that would be easy. You guys hop in the sack and bang each other's brains out. Problem solved. But the fact is you're in love with her, and she's falling for you, too, and neither of you know what to do about it."

Bending forward, he clutched at his head. "God, I need a drink. Just get out of here, okay? Leave me alone."

There was little else for me to say, so I eased out of his cabin, shutting the door behind me. For a few moments, I stood in the corridor, uncertain of what to do next, then I finally decided to head up to the bridge.

Sure, I knew how to handle a spaceship. But I didn't have a clue how to handle a woman.

## NINETEEN

*The deserted world . . . return to Talus qua'spah . . . another point of view . . . a line in the sand.*

### X

Half a day later, the *Pride* returned to Nordash. I was back in the pilot's seat again by then, and had initiated the braking maneuver that would slow the ship down and put it on course for rendezvous with the nord starbridge. Through the bridge windows, Kasimasta was a distant blur little less than half an a.u. away; at that distance, it looked no more threatening than a cloud of interstellar dust and gas.

Yet even if the Annihilator wasn't going to collide with Nordash, the planet was doomed. Once Kasimasta passed close enough to HD 70642 for its intense gravity to have an effect upon the star, solar flares would be kicked up that would bake the planet's surface. As the *Pride* made its primary approach to the starbridge, we saw that the vast armada that



had greeted us only a couple of days earlier had disappeared. Apparently the nord had completed the evacuation of their world; if any of their kind had been left behind, they were helpless against the monster rapidly closing in on them. In any event, there was no traffic around the alien starbridge, nor did we receive any radio transmissions. Nordash was an abandoned house, its former residents long gone.

Once again, I performed a one-eighty that turned the *Pride* around, then fired the maneuvering thrusters that would put us on a proper heading for the ring. Everyone was in the command center except for Ali; although he'd regained consciousness, Ted had relieved him from duty and confined him to the med bay until we returned to Coyote. So the ship was mine, and I'd be lying if I said that I minded having the stick. Perhaps I'd lost *Loose Lucy*, but being able to fly the *Pride of Cucamonga*, at least for a little while, more than made up for it.

As we closed in upon the starbridge, Jas left hiser seat and used the ceiling rails to pull himherself over to my station. I was relieved to see that the Prime Emissary no longer wore hisher weapon; at Ted's insistence, Jas had left it in hisher quarters. Nonetheless, I couldn't help but feel nervous as Jas reached past me to insert hisher key into the hjadd navigation system. Nor was I the only one who was on edge. From the other side of the console, Ted kept an eye on Jas as heshe entered fresh coordinates into the keypad.

"You are taking us back to Talus qua'spah, aren't you?" he said at last. "No surprises, right?"

Jas's head rose slightly upon hisher long neck. "There is no deception, Captain Harker. Your ship has been programmed to return to Hjarr." The Prime Emissary turned to me. "You may now engage the control system, Mr. Truffaut."

I looked over at Ted. He gave me a nod, so I took a deep breath and switched to autopilot. Lights flashed across my panel, telling me that the *Pride's* AI was slaved to the starbridge. Now I knew exactly how Ali felt when he'd done this; there's nothing worse than having to put your fate in someone else's hands.

The thrusters fired again, and the *Pride* began moving toward the ring. I checked my harness to make sure it was tight, then settled back in my seat. But just before the ship crossed the event horizon, I looked across the bridge to where Rain was seated. She'd continued to avoid me, and although our eyes met for a moment, she hastily looked away. Once again, I wished I could talk things over with her, but now that was out of the question. I was the pilot, and she was counting on me to get her home.

The wormhole opened. A blinding flash of light, and then we plunged into hyperspace.

## XI

Jas kept hisher promise. When we came out the other side of the wormhole, we were back in the Rho Coronae Borealis system.

The second time around, though, there was nothing surprising. Jas got on the horn and spoke with someone in hisher own language, and a few minutes later the local traffic system took control of the ship and guided

it the rest of the way to Talus qua'spah. I sat with my hands in my lap and watched while the *Pride* entered the same saucer that had berthed it before. Once the ship glided to a rest within the docking cradle, the gangway arms telescoped out to mate with our airlock hatches. Ted and I shut down the main engine and put all systems on standby, then the captain turned to Jas.

"Right, then," he said. "We're back. Now what do you want us to do?"

Morgan was already unbuckling his harness. "For one, I'd like to speak with someone about replacing my cargo. I'm not responsible for . . ."

"Remain seated, Mr. Goldstein." Jas barely looked his way. "Our visit will be brief, but during this time, only one individual will be allowed to disembark." Then hiser helmet swiveled in my direction. "Jules, please come with me."

As startled as I was, I couldn't help but notice that the Prime Emissary had addressed me by my first name. Now that was a change; no longer was heshe calling me "Mr. Truffaut." I was about to respond when Ted shook his head. "I'm sorry, but no. As commanding officer, I'm the person who speaks for the ship and her crew. If the High Council wants to meet with anyone . . ."

"It's okay, skipper. I can take care of myself." Taking a deep breath, I unfastened my harness. "I think I know why."

Ted hesitated, then reluctantly nodded. It only made sense that the High Council would want to see me. After all, it was my screw-up that had forced us to undertake the task we'd just completed, and it was also yours truly who'd delivered the hjadd probe to Kha-Zann. If anyone was going to answer to the Talus, it should be me. Yet I'd just pushed myself out of my chair when Rain spoke up.

"I'm going, too." She'd already risen from her seat and was pulling herself across the compartment. "I was with Jules, remember?" she added, looking at Jas. "If they've got a bone to pick with him, then they're going to have to pick it with me as well."

Jas's translator must have had trouble making sense out of Rain's colloquialisms—*pick a bone? whose bones?*—because a few moments went by before the Prime Emissary made a reply. "Yes, you may join us," heshe said at last, hiser head swinging back and forth in the hjadd affirmative. "However, you should be warned that, by doing so, the Council's judgment may be extended to you as well."

"Rain, don't . . ."

"Hush." Rain gave me a stubborn look, then turned to Jas. "I understand. So . . . let's go."

With Jas leading the way, we made our way down the access shaft to the primary hatch, then cycled through the airlock. Jas told us we didn't need to put on spacesuits, and artificial gravity was restored as soon as we entered the gangway. I was half-expecting to have to undergo decontamination again, but instead we went straight through the reception area without having to stop, take off our clothes, and get another dart in the ass. Yet when we found ourselves at the tram station, Jas stopped and stepped back from us.

"I am leaving you now," heshe said. "You may see me again later, but at

this point you will travel in a different direction." Heshe motioned to the waiting tube car. "This will transport you to where you are supposed to go. May fortune be with you."

I didn't quite know how to take this; it sounded rather ominous. As heshe began to turn away, though, Rain spoke up. "Just one question . . . would you have really left us on Kha-Zann, if it had been your choice?"

The Prime Emissary halted, and hisher head swiveled around. "I was considering the safety of the ship. You were expendable."

There wasn't much to say to that, really, except perhaps that I strongly disagreed with hisher assessment of the value of our lives. I doubted that would've made much difference, though, so I simply nodded, and Rain reluctantly did the same, and then we climbed into the car. Jas watched as the canopy slid shut; one last glimpse of himher, standing at the platform, and then the car shot down the tube and out into space.

Hard to believe that we were back here, and so soon. Only a few days ago, I thought I'd seen the last of Talus qua'spah. Yet as the car hurtled through the immense habitat, I found myself wondering whether I should have stayed aboard ship. Sure, we'd kept our side of the bargain—the *Pride* had deployed the probe and survived to tell the tale—but I couldn't shake the feeling that the Talus wasn't done with us quite yet. Only this time, I wouldn't have Ted or Emily or Ash or even Morgan to pull my bacon from the fire. Only Rain . . . and I couldn't figure for the life of me why she'd insisted on sharing the risk.

I didn't get a chance to ask, though. The car took an abrupt right turn and headed toward a cylinder that we hadn't visited during our previous trip. I'd just noticed that it didn't have any windows when the car began to decelerate. It entered a portal and coasted to a halt at another tram station, and then the canopy opened.

Rain and I climbed out onto the platform and looked around. As before, a sphincter door was recessed in the nearby wall. But this time, there was no friendly voice to tell us what to do; the door irised open, revealing another copper-paneled corridor. The message was clear: *this way, and don't forget to wipe your feet.*

"Y'know," I murmured, "this is a bad time to know me."

"Oh, hell, Jules . . . I've regretted knowing you from the moment we met." I glanced at her, and she softened the blow with a wink and a smile. "Just kidding. C'mon, let's get this over with."

The corridor took us to another door. Upon our approach, it swirled open, but beyond it lay only darkness. I stopped, reluctant to venture in. Rain was just as hesitant; her hand trembled as she took mine. Then a narrow beam of light came from a high ceiling, forming a circular spot upon a bare floor. Again, a message that was both unspoken and clear: *come in and stand here.*

Still holding hands, we entered the room. The door slid shut behind us, and when I looked back, I found that I couldn't see where it was. The spot-lit circle was just large enough for the two of us. The room was cold; when we exhaled, the light caught the fog of our breaths. It was as if we'd entered limbo, some netherworld between one plane of reality and the next.

"Okay," Rain let go of my hand to rub her shoulders for warmth, "I guess this is the part where the trap door opens and . . ."

At that instant, the whole place lit up, and we were . . .

## XII

Back on Kha-Zann.

Everything about the place was just as I had last seen it—same dark purple sky above a barren plain; same sun hanging low upon distant hills—yet somehow different. It took me a second to put my finger on it: utter silence, not even the wind. Yet it was unquestionably Kha-Zann: a ghost of a world that had recently been reduced to nothing more than debris. But how. . . ?

"Jules?" Rain said.

I thought she was talking to me. But when I looked around, I saw that we were no longer alone. A couple of feet away, a human figure wearing EVA gear was staring straight at us. His helmet faceplate was polarized, so I didn't recognize him at first. Then he took a step back. And that's when I realized who it was.

"Good grief," I murmured. "That's me."

I seemed to be watching old footage of myself, scanned two days ago and reproduced as a hologram. Behind me was the crate I'd dragged from the shuttle, its lid on the ground nearby, and now I could see that it was empty. But if that were so, then where was. . . ?

Rain laughed out loud. "Oh, now I get it," she said. "This is what the probe saw, right after you turned it on." She looked to the right, then pointed to the ground beside us. "See? There it is."

She was correct. Where our shadows should have been, instead lay the elliptical shadow of the hjadd probe. I remembered the instruments that emerged from the probe's core right after it opened; as I'd figured, one of them must have been a camera, which in turn captured ground-level images of Kha-Zann and transmitted them via hyperlink back to Talus qua'spah.

"And there's me." Rain pointed to the left; about a hundred yards away stood *Loose Lucy*. A tiny figure stood within the open hatch of its cargo bay, gazing in our direction. "If I'd known what was happening," she added, suppressing a laugh, "I would've waved."

I was still getting over the strangeness of seeing myself. As I watched, my doppelganger turned its back to us, and I knew exactly what he . . . or rather, I . . . was looking at. To the east, Kasimasta was coming into view over the horizon, larger than when we'd seen it from space.

"Oh, look . . . there you go." As Rain spoke, I saw myself begin to run away, heading for the shuttle. After the first few steps, I started doing bunny-hops, trying to make up for lost time. "Okay, now," she said, "here it comes . . . one, two, three. . ."

Everything around us suddenly blurred and jiggled, as if reality itself had turned to gelatin. Apparently this was the moment when the first tremor hit. Right on cue, I went sprawling face-first against the ground. Rain laughed out loud, and I gave her a sour look.

"Not very funny," I muttered. She hadn't realized how close I'd come to smashing my helmet against a rock.

"No, it really isn't . . . sorry." But she was amused all the same. As we watched, I struggled back to my feet and continued running toward *Lucy*, no longer performing broad-jumps but instead making an all-out dash for the shuttle. By then the image was in constant vibration; the wind had picked up, and *Lucy* was obscured by blowing sand. "Oh, c'mon," she said. "What's taking you so long?"

"You try . . ." My voice trailed off as, through the windborne silt, I saw myself climb aboard the elevator. As the cage began to make its ascent, I could see the shuttle rocking back and forth upon its landing gear. Even though I knew how this would turn out, my throat felt dry. Sure, it had been a close shave . . . but until then, I hadn't realized just how close.

The cage reached the top, then the crane's T-bar was withdrawn into the cargo hold. A couple of minutes passed, then the hatch shut. At this point, the image was shaking even more violently, but there seemed to be a long, breathless pause to the entire scene. I waited, and waited, and waited . . . and then, all of a sudden, there was a billowing explosion of sand and grey smoke from beneath the shuttle.

*Loose Lucy* silently rose from the ground, riding atop a fiery column that scorched the place where it had once rested. Craning our necks, we watched the shuttle as it grew ever smaller, becoming a tiny sliver that was soon swallowed by the dark sky. By then the tremors were continuous; the shuttle had barely disappeared when the dust storm obscured everything in sight. I caught a glimpse of the crate lid being picked up by the wind and hurtled away, followed a second later by the crate itself falling over on its side. And then . . .

Everything froze.

One minute, we were in the midst of a world's dying moments. The next, we found ourselves caught within a split-second of suspended time, as if reality itself had come to a standstill. And at that instant, words appeared in the air, holographically superimposed upon the landscape.

**IMPRESSIVE. QUITE IMPRESSIVE, INDEED.**

The words wrapped themselves around us, forming a semicircle of script. As we turned to read them, we discovered someone was with us.

The *chaaz'braan*.

### XIII

The *askanta* holy man . . . well, holy frog . . . stood only a few feet away, unobscured by the dust that masked everything else in sight. Obviously another hologram: no breathing apparatus, but instead the same robes he'd worn the first time we'd met. His heavy-lidded eyes seemed to twinkle with amusement as he raised a four-fingered hand from beneath his robes, but when his thick lips moved, we saw his words instead of hearing them.

**ALLOW ME TO MAKE US A LITTLE MORE COMFORTABLE.**

His fingers twitched slightly, and suddenly the scene around us reverted back to the way it had been a few minutes earlier. Once again, my doppelganger stood nearby, caught in the act of backing away from the *hjadd* probe.

**THERE. THAT'S BETTER.**

The chaaz'braan sauntered toward my image, stopping to look at it more closely. When he spoke, his words curled around us, forming a ring.

**THIS REALLY WAS QUITE AN ACT OF COURAGE. YOU COULD HAVE SIMPLY THROWN THE PROBE FROM YOUR SPACECRAFT AND LAUNCHED AGAIN, BUT INSTEAD YOU CHOSE TO PLACE IT ON THE GROUND AND MAKE SURE THAT IT WAS PROPERLY ACTIVATED.**

"Thank you." Rain then shook her head. "Pardon me, but I don't understand why you're . . ." She gestured toward the holographic script, which was already fading from sight. "Communicating with us this way, I mean."

The chaaz'braan turned to us. Again, when his mouth moved, we heard nothing but silence.

**IT IS THE CUSTOM OF SA'TONG THAT MY VOICE REMAIN UNHEARD, SAVE DURING RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES. LIKE OTHER RACES OF THE TALUS, I USE A TRANSLATOR. UNLIKE THEM, THOUGH, WHAT I SAY IS TRANSCRIBED. SO THIS IS MY WAY OF ADDRESSING VISITORS DURING INFORMAL OCCASIONS.**

As he spoke, other figures began to materialize, forming a broad circle that surrounded us: aliens whom we'd seen during the reception, apparently representatives of the High Council. They observed our conversation in silence; I assumed that they were also seeing what the chaaz'braan had to say, only translated into their own languages.

"But you didn't do that before." I did my best to ignore our audience. "I mean, when we were at the reception."

Saliva drooled from the chaaz'braan's fleshy mouth as it spread a broad smile.

**YOU DIDN'T GIVE ME A CHANCE. THAT'S UNDERSTANDABLE, CONSIDERING THAT YOU WERE NOT IN A SOBER STATE OF MIND. OTHERWISE, WE MIGHT HAVE HAD A PLEASANT DISCUSSION.**

Again, he turned toward my image. It seemed as if he was studying it with admiration.

**THIS TRULY IS AMAZING. SUCH COURAGE IS RARE AMONG INTELLIGENT RACES. PARTICULARLY THE HJADD, WHO SELDOM TAKE RISKS. AT LEAST NOT IF THEY CAN GET SOMEONE ELSE TO DO IT FOR THEM.**

"So you're satisfied that we've done what you asked us to do?" Rain had noticed the other aliens as well, but she kept her attention on the chaaz'braan.

**YOU'VE PERFORMED AN IMMENSE SERVICE TO THE TALUS. THE PROBE DIDN'T SURVIVE VERY LONG, BUT WHILE IT DID, DATA WAS GATHERED THAT WILL BE INVALUABLE TO OUR SCIENTISTS. IN TIME, IT MAY EVENTUALLY HELP US DEVISE THE MEANS BY WHICH TO DESTROY KASIMASTA.**

"Destroy a black hole?" I shook my head. "That's . . . I'm sorry, but that's impossible."

The chaaz'braan regarded me with what seemed to be condescension.

**NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE. ONCE YOUR KIND BECOMES MORE SOPHISTICATED, YOU WILL LEARN THIS. PERHAPS AS YOU INTERACT WITH OTHER RACES OF THE GALAXY.**

"Then I take it that we've fulfilled our obligation." I let out my breath. "I



didn't have a chance to say so myself, but I'm very sorry that I offended you. We will try not to do so again."

**IT WAS ONLY A MISUNDERSTANDING. YOU WERE NOT INFORMED OF THE PRACTICES AND CUSTOMS OF SA'TONG. THE GOD THAT IS YOU WILL KNOW BETTER NEXT TIME.**

*The god that is you?* "What do you mean by that?"

**SA'TONG HOLDS THAT THERE IS NO GOD EXCEPT THOSE WHICH WE CREATE OURSELVES. THEREFORE, IF YOU HAVE CREATED A GOD, THEN YOU YOURSELF ARE A GOD, AND THEREFORE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR OWN ACTIONS.**

I nodded. Made sense, although I imagined that a few theologians among my own kind would argue with it. Before I could say anything, though, my image faded away, and the chaaz'braan spoke again.

**BE THAT AS IT MAY, YOU MUST KNOW THAT, BEFORE YOUR KIND IS ALLOWED TO JOIN THE TALUS, THERE ARE OTHER OBLIGATIONS WE MAY WISH FOR YOU TO FULFILL.**

"Other obligations?" I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

**AS I SAID, YOU HAVE DEMONSTRATED A CERTAIN FORTITUDE THAT IS RARELY SEEN. THIS WILL BE USEFUL TO US. SO BEFORE YOUR RACE IS ADMITTED INTO THE TALUS, YOU WILL BE GIVEN OTHER TASKS THAT WE WISH TO HAVE PERFORMED ON OUR BEHALF.**

"No." I shook my head. "Sorry, but . . . no."

Rain looked around at me, her mouth falling open in astonishment. And indeed, I almost regretted my words even as I spoke them. After all, you don't tell the great galactic frog to go jump a lily pad.

But I knew where this was going to lead. One day, it was risking life and limb to place a probe in the path of a rogue black hole. The next . . . well, what then? Dive a ship into the heart of a supernova to see if we'd get burned? Take on a race of killer tomatoes? Maybe Goldstein would assent to all this in hopes of getting a good deal for his next shipment of cannabis, but I wasn't about to let humankind become the crash test dummies of the galaxy.

"Look," I went on, "we've kept our side of the bargain . . . and believe me when I tell you that we thought we were going to die doing it. But it's done, and that's it. No more."

The chaaz'braan's eyes narrowed.

**YOU DON'T HAVE A CHOICE.**

"Oh, yes, we do." Sucking up my courage, I took a step toward him. "We can go back to where we came from, and never have anything to do with you again. Nice to make your acquaintance, but . . . well, if you think we're going to be your cabana boys from now on, then think again."

From the corner of my eye, I could see the members of the High Council turning toward one another. We couldn't hear what they were saying, but I had little doubt that I'd ruffled fur, feathers, scales, or whatever else they had on them.

"Jules . . ." Rain whispered. "What are you . . .?"

I ignored her. Too late to back down now. And damn it, it was time to take a stand.

"We are what we are," I went on. "Perhaps we're not as mature as you'd

like us to be. Maybe we're going to make mistakes. I know I have, and my friends have had to pay for me being a fool. But you're just going to have to accept that and cut us some slack."

I paused, then shook my head. "But no more conditions. No more jobs. Period."

The chaaz'braan said nothing. For several seconds, the air around us remained clear, vacant of floating words. He stared at me for a long time, the wattles of his thick neck trembling with what I assumed was irritation. Around us, the other aliens continued to talk among themselves. Hard not to figure out what they were saying: *who the hell does he think he is?*

I stole a glance at Rain. Her face had gone pale, but she nodded in quiet agreement. I'd just drawn a line in the sand; now we would have to see whether they would cross it. At last, the chaaz'braan spoke.

**YOU MAY RETURN TO YOUR WORLD. WE WILL BE CONTACTING YOU SOON WITH OUR DECISION.**

And then, without so much as a farewell, he faded from sight. An instant later, the other aliens vanished.

The room went dark, save for the shaft of light in which Rain and I once again found ourselves. The door through which we'd entered swirled open, revealing the corridor beyond. Neither of us said anything as we left the room, but as the door shut behind us, she let out her breath.

"So—" she hesitated—"what do we tell the others?"

I shrugged. "We tell 'em we can go home. After that . . . I don't know."

## TWENTY

*Home run . . . a sudden Rain . . . key to the galaxy . . . the narrative ends.*

### XIV

**T**hree days later, I was sitting in the bleachers of University Field, watching the Battling Boids thump the Fighting Swampers.

The Boids had gotten a little better since the last time I'd seen them . . . which seemed like a lifetime ago, although it had only been a week. Either that, or I'd become a little more forgiving; when the Boid pitcher allowed a Swamper to slide into first on a bunt, I wasn't cursing the way I once might have. Perhaps I'd grown up a bit. Or maybe it was simply because, once you've been halfway across the galaxy and back again, it's hard to take baseball seriously any more.

Indeed, ever since my return from Rho Coronae Borealis, it had been hard for me to get back into the habits of my old life. Ash was right; now that I'd seen the Great Beyond, nothing was the same again. Oh, I still had my room at the Soldier's Joy, and the previous night I'd trooped over to Lew's Cantina and put away a few pints of ale . . . but when I'd finally left the bar, I'd found myself standing in the middle of the street, staring up at the night sky. Somewhere out there were countless worlds whose

inhabitants were waiting for humankind to join them. What's beer and baseball compared to that?

But it was more than that. I was alone.

Rain wasn't with me.

When the *Pride of Cucamonga* finally made the jump back to 47 Ursae Majoris, hardly anyone took notice of our return. I wasn't expecting a parade, mind you, but it was still disappointing to find that no one paid attention to the fact that we'd just completed a journey of more than four hundred and fourteen light-years. Indeed, we practically limped home; there was barely enough fuel left in the tank to get us there from the star-bridge, and a shuttle had to be sent up from New Brighton to meet us once the ship settled into orbit above Coyote. As the shuttle detached from the docking collar, I caught one last glimpse of the *Pride* through the window beside my seat. Before we'd left, she had merely been a beat-up old freighter. Now, with her cargo modules gone, her shuttle missing, and her hull plates pitted, warped, and scorched, she looked like a candidate for the junkyard.

Nonetheless, she'd brought us safely home. No one said anything as the shuttle peeled away, but I couldn't help but notice Emily rubbing the corners of her eyes, or the way Doc gnawed at his lower lip. I think everyone was saying farewell in his or her own silent way.

We touched down in New Brighton, and it was there that we saw the last of Morgan Goldstein and Mahamatasja Jas Sa-Fhadda. Once Rain and I returned to the *Pride* after our meeting with the chaaz'braan, I was surprised to learn that Jas had already come back aboard and programmed the coordinates for 47 Uma into the nav system. After that, the Prime Emissary spent the rest of the trip in hisher cabin; when the shuttle landed, Morgan escorted himher to a waiting hovercoupe, and the two of them departed without so much as a goodbye, leaving the rest of us to catch the afternoon gyrobus to New Florida. Hell, we even had to pay the fare ourselves.

Not that our merry band had much left to say to one another. Perhaps it's uncharitable to say it, but we were sick and tired of each other. It had been a long and exhausting journey, and I think all of us were just happy to get home alive. So the ride to Liberty was made in near silence, and once we got there we all pretty much went our own separate ways. Ted and Emily caught a shag wagon to their house, Doc escorted Ali to the hospital for further treatment, Ash lurched off to the nearest watering hole, and Rain and I . . .

Ah, but that's a different story, isn't it?

Sure, we went back to the Soldier's Joy together. That's where we'd left our belongings; for me, it was the only home I'd known, at least on Coyote. But if I'd had any notions that Rain and I would consummate our romance with a playful romp in bed, I was sadly mistaken. Once we retrieved our room keys from the front desk, Rain gave me a quick buss on the cheek and said that she'd see me later. Since the landlady was giving us the eye, I figured this would be a bad time to push the issue. Besides, I was dead tired; all I wanted to do in bed just then was study my eyelids.

So I went up to my room and rediscovered the subtle charm of being able to sleep on a mattress. Eight hours in the hay, followed by a hot shower and a change of clothes, put me in a better frame of mind. The sun had risen on a new day, and I figured that the proper thing to do was to find Rain and buy her breakfast. And while we were at it, perhaps we'd figure out what to do next.

Yes, well . . . maybe that's the way things should have gone. But it wasn't the way it went.

When I knocked on her door, there was no answer, and when I checked the dining room, I saw only a handful of strangers. I was about to go back to her room and try again when the innkeeper spotted me crossing the lobby. Was I looking for my lady friend? Sorry, sir, but she'd checked out earlier that morning . . . and no, she hadn't left a forwarding address.

And that was it. She was gone.

## XV

So there I was, watching a baseball game and trying not to feel like a guy whose heart had just been carved from his chest and handed to him, when someone sat down on the bench next to me. I looked around, and saw that it was Rain.

"Hi," she said. "Miss me?"

"Umm . . ." About a half-dozen possible responses flashed through my mind, some more heated than others. I settled for the simplest and least angry. "Yeah, I did. Where have you been?"

"Away." She wore a homespun hemp sweater and a long cotton skirt, and it was the first time in awhile that I'd seen her in anything that wasn't suitable for space travel; the change was nice. Aware that her reply didn't explain much, she went on. "I needed to get away for a bit, think things over. So I went to stay with my aunt and uncle, and now . . ."

A crack of a bat, and we looked up in time to see a Boid send a fly ball into center field. The Swamper outfielders scrambled to retrieve it, but they recovered too late to prevent the batter from making it safely to first or the guy on second to grab third. The crowd around us clapped and shouted, save for the handful of Swamper fans who scowled at another lousy defensive play by their team.

"So you're back," I said, once everyone had settled down again. "Did you . . . I mean, have you worked things out?"

Rain didn't say anything for a moment. She sat next to me, arms propped on her knees, a smile on her face that was both warm and cautious. "What about you? I see you've still got a room at the inn . . . or at least you did when I checked a little while ago."

That must have been how she'd found me; I'd mentioned to the landlady that I was planning to go to the ball game. "Yeah, I'm still there. Right after you left, Morgan sent over his man Kennedy with a check for what he owed me. Not much, but enough to pay the rent," I shrugged. "Or at least until the proctors haul me off to the stockade."

"They won't." She shook her head. "Whatever else happens, that's not something you have to worry about any more."

She said this with such confidence that I forgot about the game. "How do you know?"

"Umm . . ." Rain hesitated. "I told you I went to stay with my aunt and uncle, right?" I nodded. "And you know, of course, that my family is pretty well connected?"

I recalled my argument with Ted, shortly before the *Pride* set out for Rho Coronae Borealis, during which he'd quietly let me know that Rain's family owned the Thompson Wood Company. I hadn't thought much about it since then, but now . . . "Yeah, I know that."

"But I bet you don't know just how well-connected they are." Moving a little closer, she dropped her voice so that she wouldn't be overheard. "Ever heard of Carlos Montero? Or Wendy Gunther?"

I hadn't been on Coyote long enough to learn all of its history, but even so, those were names that even people on Earth recognized. "Sure. Original colonists. Led the Revolution. Went on to become presidents of the Coyote Federation, one after the other. Why do you. . . ?"

My voice trailed off as I suddenly realized what she was saying. Before I could do much more than turn my mouth into a bug trap, she gave me a solemn nod.

"Uh-huh. My mother is Carlos's younger sister. She married into the Thompson family, which makes Hawk and me . . ." Realizing that she was about to mention her brother again, she stopped herself. "Anyway, they're my aunt and uncle. Surprised?"

"Yes." That was all I could manage at the moment.

"Thought you might be. At any rate . . ." Rain folded her hands together in the lap of her skirt. "While I was staying with them, I told them all about you, and how Morgan tried to screw you out of the deal you guys made. Now, even though Uncle Carlos also happens to be one of Janus's major investors, he's also learned not to trust Morgan very much. And if there's anyone in Liberty with more clout than Morgan Goldstein, it's my uncle."

"So what does this. . . ?"

"Mean?" A sly smile. "To make a long story short, this morning he met with the chief magistrate, and over coffee he managed to persuade her to drop all charges against you. Not only that, but your plea for political amnesty is being—" a sly wink "—considered. But since you've got him on your side, I'd say it's a safe bet."

I let out my breath, shut my eyes. For a few moments, I didn't know how to respond. Rain must have sensed this, because she took my hand. "It's okay," she murmured. "All you have to do is say, 'Thank you, Rain.'"

"Thank you, Rain." Then I looked at her again. "Do you know just how much I. . . ?"

"I'm not done yet."

Down in the batter's box, a Boid finally struck out, ending the fifth inning. I wasn't paying much attention to the game anymore. "There's more?"

"Uh-huh." Rain gently removed her hand from mine. "Speaking of Morgan . . ."

"Oh, crap. Here it comes." I shook my head. "He's not very happy with

me, y'know. Not after I dumped his cargo. And I can't imagine he's going to be very pleased about . . ."

"He's not, but that doesn't matter anymore." She hesitated. "He knows about what happened back there. On Talus qua'spah, I mean."

I stared at her. We'd been careful not to reveal the details of our encounter with the chaz'braan and the Talus High Council, other than to tell the rest of the crew that we'd met our obligation and we had been given permission to return to Coyote. "You didn't tell him . . . I mean, about what I said to . . .?"

"I didn't, no . . . but he learned that for himself. From Jas." Another pause. "That's the other reason I'm here. Heshe called me last night, and told me that heshe wants to see you."

"Jas?" I asked, and she nodded. "When? Now?"

"Uh-huh. Now." She glanced at the field. "Unless, of course, you'd rather wait until this is over."

It was at the top of the sixth, with the Boids leading the Swampers 5-2. I figured my team could get along without me, so I stood up. "No sense in keeping himher waiting," I said, offering her my hand. "Let's go."

## XVI

We climbed down from the bleachers and left the field, then walked across the university campus until we reached the low hill overlooking the hjadd embassy. An ironic moment; it was at this very same spot that Morgan had told me how he'd wanted to gain access to their technology. In only a week or so, I'd come full circle.

I thought Rain was going to take me the rest of the way to the compound, but instead she stopped and took a seat on the wooden bench beneath the trees. Puzzled, I was about to ask her why, when she looked past me and nodded. I looked around as two familiar figures emerged from the shadows behind a tree.

Jas, once again wearing his environment suit. And with him, Ash.

I couldn't say which of them I was more surprised to see. The hjadd seldom left their embassy. Not only that, but judging from his steady gait, I could tell that Ash was stone sober.

"No, I haven't been drinking." As usual, Ash was one thought ahead of me. "To tell the truth, I haven't touched a drop since . . ." A sheepish grin from within his hood. "Well, since the bender I had right after we got back."

Two days. For him, that was something of a record. "I've been wondering why I haven't heard from you . . . your guitar, that is. You're not at the inn anymore?"

"Checked out the next morning, after I spent the night in an alley." He reached up to pull back his hood. "Y'know, every now and then, an alcoholic receives a moment of clarity when you come to realize that, if you don't stop drinking, you're going to die. I think I had my moment while we were out there . . . just took a little while for it to sink in, that's all."

"So you're on the wagon?" I asked, and he nodded. "Good for you."

"Well . . ." Ash glanced at Jas. "I'm getting a little help from a friend."

"Mr. Ash is working for us now." Jas's voice purred from the grille of



hisher suit. "The High Council has reached its decision, so we will need someone to act as an intermediary. I have offered him that position, on the stipulation that he discontinue his alcohol abuse."

"Sa'Tong is an interesting religion . . . well, it's not really a religion, or at least not as we know it. However you want to call it, though, it has some neat tricks for learning mental discipline." Ash paused. "I'm not over it yet, but I'm getting there."

"Well, that's . . ." I suddenly realized what Jas had just said. "Whoa, wait a second . . . what's that about the Talus?"

Jas moved a little closer, until I could see my reflection in the faceplate of his helmet. "Upon the recommendation of the chaaz'braan, the High Council has decided to invite humankind to join the Talus, provided that your race accepts and agrees to abide by its rules. Even as we speak, the hjadd embassy is sending a formal communiqué to the Coyote Federation, requesting a meeting in which we may negotiate trade and cultural exchanges."

For a moment, I was unable to speak. Feeling my knees giving way beneath me, I hobbled over to the bench. "Easy, now," Rain murmured, reaching up to help me find a seat. "Deep breaths . . . thataboy . . ."

"I thought . . . I thought . . ." For the second time in the last hour, I didn't know quite what to say. I took Rain's advice, and once my head stopped spinning, I tried again. "I thought the chaaz'braan . . . well, that I'd blown it."

"Blown it?" Jas's helmet cocked to one side. "I fail to understand."

"That I'd said too much. Or said the wrong thing."

"No. What you said to the chaaz'braan and the High Council was correct. Humankind has the right to exist on its own terms, without being subservient to others. Your race has met its obligations. There will be no others."

"In other words, they've decided to trust us." Rain smiled at me.

"She's right." Ash nodded. "I've heard about what you said to them. They didn't like hearing it, but it went a long way toward redeeming us." Another pause. "That took a lot of guts, man . . . but it paid off."

Now that was a lot to absorb. At the very least, it wasn't what I'd expected to hear. Another deep breath, then I sat up a little straighter. "So . . . well, that's great. Glad to hear everything's going to work out for the . . ."

"I have not yet finished." Jas held up a hand. "Once the Talus has completed negotiations with your race, the hjadd will resume trade with Coyote. Morgan Goldstein has already expressed his desire to continue transporting consumer goods to Talus qua'spah, although I understand that he wants a more equitable arrangement."

I couldn't help but grin. Couldn't blame Morgan for desiring something more useful than two thousand paperweights. And if I never saw another gnosh again, it would be too soon. "Sounds reasonable. Of course, he's going to have to get another ship."

Rain nodded. "Another ship, yeah . . . the *Pride* is pretty much shot. Doc's gone back up there to see what can be salvaged before she's scuttled."

I grimaced. That wouldn't be a pleasant task; the *Pride* was Doc's ship, and she'd brought us home alive. Maybe Morgan didn't consider it cost-

effective to have her refitted again, but it would still be painful for Doc to let her go. "I hope he doesn't plan to retire after this," I said. "He's a good man."

"I hope not either. I'd like to work with him again." Rain hesitated. "I hope you will, too . . . once we get the new ship."

"Huh?" I gave her a sharp look. "But Morgan . . ."

"Morgan fired you, yes . . . and now he wants to rehire you." She shrugged. "Or maybe he just decided not to fire you in the first place. At any rate, I've been told to tell you that he'd like to offer you a permanent contract, once the new ship is delivered."

"Same job?"

"No." She smiled at me again. "This time, you've got the helm . . . unless, of course, you'd really rather be a shuttle jockey." She paused, then quietly added, "Don't say no. Please."

I wasn't about to refuse, even if it meant having Morgan as my boss again. "I take it that Ted and Emily still have their jobs, too," I asked, and she nodded. "And you?"

"The only person who isn't being offered a contract renewal is Ali," Ash said. "Or at least not until he learns to manage his temper a little better."

"Do I assume correctly that you are willing to accept this position?" Jas stepped toward me. "Or should I wait until you've made a final decision?"

I didn't reply at once. Instead, I looked at Rain. She said nothing, but something in her eyes told me she'd make it worthwhile. And I still had a room at the inn . . .

"Sure. I'm in." I grinned. "Why not?"

She moved closer to me. Before I knew what was happening, she'd given me a kiss. For someone whom I'd once considered a prude, she knew how to do that pretty damn well. I was about to put my arms around her when Ash cleared his throat. Damn telepath. I was about to tell him to get out of my head and go take a cold shower when I felt something prod my shoulder. Looking around, I saw what it was.

A hjadd navigation key. Jas held out his hand and offered it to me.

"You will need this," he said.

## XV

All this happened many years ago. I was a younger man then, immature and a little too full of myself. Looking back at it now, I realize that perhaps there were things I should have done in a different way. On the other hand, if I hadn't been so young and stupid, would I have been so fortunate to be where I am now?

I don't know. Perhaps it's human nature to second-guess ourselves. What I do know is that I've got a woman who loves me, a ship to fly, and the key to the galaxy. We've been out here for quite a while, and there are still plenty of stars left for us to see.

And I also know Ash was right. If all you want is a normal life, then it takes nothing to stay home. But once you've been to the Great Beyond, nothing is ever the same again.

Trust me.

Trust yourself. ○

## CHess PEOPLE

If chess people were  
the world, everything  
would be checkered.

We would ride checkered  
cabs down checkered  
streets to arrive at our  
checkered assignations.

Maps of our cities  
would be truly rectilinear,  
numbered and lettered so  
there would be no mistakes.

According to your stature,  
you could only travel  
such rigid grids  
in prescribed fashion.

If chess people were  
the world, we would be  
forever trying to mate  
one another with logic  
and spurious device,  
winning and losing  
or calling it a draw.

Some women would be queens,  
both swift and extreme  
in their power.

Certain men, in kingly repose,  
would expect nothing less  
than royal dedication.

Most of us would be pawns,  
immured in the fray,  
with slight hope  
of transformation.

Each of us searching  
for that perfect combination.

—Bruce Boston

### Introduction

Although each of these fine small-press volumes could support my usual interminable exegesis at greater lengths than they're given here, I feel that even just a short, sharp, sincere boost is valuable for alerting you to their existence, and allows me to spread the press-coverage wealth, such as it is, amongst as many titles as possible. So without further ado . . .

### Poetry

The preponderance of the poems in G. O. Clark's 25¢ *Rocket Ship to the Stars* (Dark Regions Press, chapbook, \$6.95, 50 pages, ISBN 978-1-888993-43-1) concern themselves with astronomical tropes: abandoned patio furniture on the Moon; an enigmatic celestial smile that frustrates telescopes; Spot the Dog, of children's book fame, orbiting the Earth. As such, these poems read like enchanting, nostalgic fables of the Space Age. And every now and then, Clark tosses in a surreal bombshell like "Sunday at the Virtual Beach," with its "honeybees with the facial features of cherubs," just to loft your pleasures to a new realm of imagination.

A very handsome cover and interior illos by Matt Taggart are the icing on the tasty cake that is Corrine De Winter's demi-gothic *Tango in the Ninth Circle* (Dark Regions Press, chapbook, \$6.95, 43 pages, ISBN 1-888993-42-1). De Winter's poems are like Tori

Amos's songs: piercing, melancholy, reflective; unlike Amos, De Winter relies fruitfully on the supernatural as metaphor and talisman. She namechecks Leonard Cohen in "Enter Valentine" and that old bard's mournful yet hopeful and ruminative tone is another apt comparison. In a poem like "The Body in Love," De Winter perfectly fuses the corporeal limitations and exaltations of our material forms with the spiritual longings and imaginings of our souls.

Darrell Schweitzer is surely "tetched" in the head. I mean this in the most complimentary manner. Only one who had slept too long outside under the full moon and basked in infernal influences could have written *The Arkham Alphabet Book* (Zadok Allen: Publisher, chapbook, \$4.00, 28 pages, ISBN unavailable). This is a Lovecraftian primer that lurches grimly and gleefully through the alphabet of madness, each page illumined in ghastly fashion by Allen Koszowski. If you wish to raise your children as anything other than fodder for the return of the Old Ones, send your useless human money to Darrell at 6644 Rutland Street, Philadelphia, PA 19149.

Readers of this magazine will certainly recall Bruce Boston's excellent poem "Heavy Weather," which took an *Asimov's* Readers' Award for 2005. It's to be found nowadays in *Shades Fantastic* (Gromagon Press, chapbook, \$6.95, 50 pages, ISBN 0-9776665-3-0), along with a wealth of other rich material, including several hitherto-unpublished items. Only

from the mind of Boston could we learn, for instance, that the dogs of Atlantis have stolen their barks "from the heady dialogues of Philosopher-Kings." Such startling imagery, as well as keen observations of life, loss, and love, are delivered in succinct and meaty lines. Like the multifarious women who fill "Visions of the Blue Clone," Boston's poems are easy to embrace and never twice the same.

Somewhat similar to Bruce Boston's sensibilities, but with threads of Steve Aylett's gonzoiness, we discover Jason Christie with his *i-ROBOT Poetry* (EDGE, trade paper, \$19.95, 112 pages, ISBN 978-1-894063-24-1). Together, these scores of poems build up a surreal cybernetic future where the problems of machine intelligence assume positively Asimovian dimensions. A poem like "Merciless," with its presentation of a suffering robot who wishes nothing more than the release of sleep, expertly walks the tightrope between pathos and sentimentality. Whether full narratives ("Everybody Do the Robot") or only composed of single lines ("Robota!": "Was the holographic turkey hot-looking enough when we had our paid friends over for a pretend dinner party on act-like-a-human day"), Christie's poems achieve startling insights into non-human humanity.

Fittingly enough, given its title, Bobbi Sinha-Morley's mammoth compilation, *Songs of a Sorceress* (Cambridge Books, trade paperback, \$15.95, 328 pages, ISBN 1-59431-319-9) is suffused with powerful women. Dryads, goddesses, nymphs, mothers, sorceresses, of course, and many other emblematic females. They move through quiet moments and epic trials of courage with equal grace. Sinha-Morley favors very short lines, which gives her poems an incantatory edge. She blends

Wiccan, Greek, Hindu, and Native American religious motifs into a luminescent theology of the individual questing soul. I particularly enjoyed her "Café" poems, in which fanciful menus of wonders are evoked. From "At the Silver Creek Café": "where autumn/comes in a jar/and sarsaparilla is/served in a stein."

### Nonfiction

Anything connected with the enigmatic and perilous SF writer named Jeff Lint (see Steve Aylett's *Lint* [2005] for a biographical map of the crime scene) is subject to ambiguity. But I think that I can safely report this much: with *And Your Point Is?* (Raw Dog Screaming Press, trade paperback, \$10.95, 109 pages, ISBN 978-933293-17-2), Steve Aylett has assembled a "Lint Companion," so to speak, that is fit to live on in infamy next to Lint's own mighty non-linear screeds. These mini-essays explicating "Scorn & Meaning in Jeff Lint's fiction" all bear the true and accurate stamp of gleeful derangement so characteristic of Lint the man, Lint the books, and Lint the monster from the fourth dimension.

The newish firm of Payseur & Schmidt specializes in books that are also limited-run and signed art objects. But this is not to say these publishers neglect content. Far from it! Their recent offering should prove just how invalid such a notion is. John Clute's lexicon of critical terms for the horror field, *The Darkening Garden* (hardcover, \$45.00, 162 pages, ISBN 978-0-9789114-0-9) has enough intellectual heft to make your brain expand like the Scarecrow's once Oz rewarded him. Translating his "four season" schematic for fantasy novels to a similar cir-

cuitry for horror novels, Clute imposes brilliant rigor on a sprawling canon, and illuminates its darkest corners. Also, check out the accompanying postcard set done by thirty very talented artists.

Anyone lucky enough to have heard John Crowley read aloud—or actually, even those who have intuited his mesmeric natural speaking voice from his fine fictions—will once more hear his distinctive tones and will encounter the same mix of keen intelligence, quirky affections and wry wisdom that they have come to expect from the man in person through the pages of *In Other Words* (Subterranean Press, hardcover, \$35.00, 206 pages, ISBN 1-59606-062-X), a collection of his non-fiction. Whether writing about the craft of writing, the deep structures of narrative, or simply (never simply!) reviewing novels and nonfictions, Crowley's essays convey his perpetual fascination with and amazement at the "labyrinth of the world and the paradise of the heart." Just the piece on Walt Kelly's *Pogo* alone is worth the cost of this volume.

With his new book of essays, *Full Metal Apache: Transactions Between Cyberpunk Japan and Avant-Pop America* (Duke University Press, trade paper, \$22.95, 272 pages, ISBN 0-8223-3774-6), Japanese master critic Takayuki Tatsumi provides an invaluable window into the complex cross-cultural flow of ideas between two countries arguably at the bleeding edge of futurism and SF. Not only will the lucky reader be exposed to a myriad Japanese works of fabulism probably little known to most of us Westerners—such as Shozo Numa's *Yapoo the Human Cattle* (1956-1999) and Kunio Yanagita's *Tono*

*Monogatari* (1910)—but that reader will have his head rewired in terms of understanding literary landmarks of the English language, such as Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990). And all of this will be accomplished through Tatsumi's spark-filled, spunky, spontaneous bop prosody.

Just as rude and graphically assaultive as any classic punk fanzine, but infinitely more sophisticated, Jon Farmer's *Sieg Heil, Iconographers* (Savoy Books, trade paper, £25.00, 608 pages, ISBN 0861301161) continues—after D.M. Mitchell's *A Serious Life* (2004)—to tell the history of Britton & Butterworth's Savoy empire. More a survey of the personalities and individual publishing landmarks than a linear chronicle, the book makes a bold case for locating Savoy closer to the heart of SF publishing than the fringes. With Michael Moorcock looming like a deity over the whole thirty years of the scandalous firm, Farmer paints a vibrant picture of a cabal of free-speech-crazed creators delivering harsh truths.

Mark Finn, biographer, is, in his literary fashion, as large a hero as Conan, the most famous creation of Robert E. Howard, who happens to be the subject of *Blood & Thunder* (Monkey Brain Books, trade paper, \$15.95, 272 pages, ISBN 1-932265-21-X). Battling manfully through the hordes of lies and legends surrounding REH, Finn delivers a clear-eyed, sympathetic yet objective portrait of this seminal writer. Depicting the man, his place and times, and his story-telling accomplishments vividly and discerningly, Finn shows that journalistic accuracy is actually more powerful than sleazy mythologizing. This book will be enjoyed by veteran fan and newbie alike.



## Novels and Novellas

Remember Harvey comics? Casper, Hot Stuff, Richie Rich, et al.? There's something about Richard Sala's fluid linework that evokes those icons for me, without precisely resembling them. The teenage villain in his latest graphic novel, *The Grave Robber's Daughter* (Fantagraphics, trade paperback, \$9.95, 96 pages, ISBN 978-1-56097-773-5) reminds me of Little Audrey's pal Melvin, gone bad. Of course, Sala does not purvey the wholesome saccharine sweetness of Baby Huey and company, but rather the wonderfully twisted perversity of a Charles Burns. When Nancy-Drew-alike Judy Drood ends up in the deserted town of Obidiah's Glen, she encounters enough sacrilegious shenanigans to satisfy any lover of the supernatural. Judy's main assets are a foul temper and a mean right hook. She's my kind of girl sleuth.

If Mickey Spillane had collaborated with both Fred Pohl and Phil Dick, he might have produced Bruce Golden's *Better Than Chocolate* (Zumaya Publications, trade paperback, \$15.99, 292 pages, ISBN 978-1-934135-46-4). In the middle of the twenty-first century, Inspector Noah Dane of the San Francisco police has to overcome the replacement of his murdered partner with a "celebudroid" in the form of Marilyn Monroe, while dealing with his runaway daughter and the machinations of aliens known as "Trolls." And how does "America's favorite virgin," media superstar Chastity Blume, fit into the picture? You'll only learn by racing gleefully through gonzo chapters with such titles as "Bubble Gum, Bug Poison, and the Spirituality of Key Lime Pie."

Jonathan Lethem, in his cogent introduction to the latest reprinting

of John Franklin Bardin's cult classic, *The Deadly Percheron* (Millipede Press, trade paperback, \$15.00, 224 pages, ISBN 1-933618-10-8), beautifully establishes the "amnesia novel" lineage of this fiendishly clever and surreal psychological mystery. I'll simply add that it's the best *Unknown*-style novel never to appear in *Unknown*, and that if Preston Sturges and David Lynch ever had the chance to collaborate, this would be the project for them. Dr. George Matthews, psychiatrist, runs afoul of a patient with delusions of leprechauns, and is swiftly drawn into a murderous scheme that results in Phildickian identity shifts. Add in some Ashcan Realism, and you get a novel that's at once a perfect expression of its period, and also eternally weird.

There's a ghost at the center of Tim Powers's novella *A Soul in a Bottle* (Subterranean, hardcover, \$22.00, 82 pages, ISBN 1-59606-075-1), but to reveal this much is not to spoil anything, since the reader learns early on the truth about the mysterious woman met by the loner protagonist outside Grauman's Chinese Theater. The secrets and surprises come hot and heavy (this is an erotic tale, after all) in her identity, how she died, and what she wants. Powers, as ever, writes with immense sensitivity, delicacy, and immediacy. The poignancy of this tale rivals Robert Nathan's *Portrait of Jennie* (1940). Additionally, killer artwork from J.K. Potter syncs perfectly with the text.

Some of the same karmic impulse that must have motivated Heinlein to write *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) seems to have lodged in the breast of John Shirley, because his new novel, *The Other End* (Cemetery Dance, hardcover, \$40.00, 292 pages, ISBN 1-58767-150-6), at times recalls

that earlier classic: higher-level consciousness erupts into the fallen human sphere, and radicalizes existence. But at the same time, given Shirley's political bent, there's another explicit motivation for his novel: offering a counterweight to the smarmy success of the *Left Behind* series. In any case, what we have here is a bang-up apocalypse told from "the other end of the philosophical spectrum," as Shirley declares in his "Author's Note." And a fine book it is. Following a large cast of characters—most notably, reporter Jim Swift and his family—Shirley details the three phases of human transcendence and judgment that follow on the heels of the arrival of messengers from the Absolute. Deftly weaving Gnosticism and science together, Shirley dares to make the unimaginable concrete, depicting the ineffable and summoning up genuine visions of the laws of the universe above morality. One character describes his epiphany as "something painful and powerful and gorgeous at once," and that's an apt description of this novel as well.

### Single-author Collections

Spilt Milk Press shows the world how to produce an attractive chapbook. *The Sense of Falling* (\$5.00, 62 pages, ISBN unavailable), consisting of stories by Ezra Pines, features handsome design; an introduction by an author with a certain level of name recognition (Hal Duncan); some original stories as well as reprints; clear copyright acknowledgements for nerdy bibliographers such as I; attractive interior art by Mark Rich; and an author's Afterword. But of course all this would avail naught if not for the magnifi-

cence of the fiction herein. Pines writes like an R.A. Lafferty raised on a diet of the TV show *Lost* and the prose of André Breton. His "Mr. Brain" sequence of stories is hilarious, while his other pieces are disturbingly surreal, yet emotionally close to the bone. The unstable nature of reality is Pines's theme in all cases, and seldom has a sense of falling felt so right.

Just as impressive as the Pines volume is *Show and Tell and Other Stories* (Tropism Press, chapbook, \$6.00, 56 pages, ISBN unavailable), containing six marvelous tales by Greg van Eekhout (with the author's own illos!), plus his informative notes. Van Eekhout's language is zestily inventive, his story premises splendidly wacky, and his execution flawless. Whether he features Santa Claus as an end-times superhero à la Captain Future ("In the Late December") or posthuman school kids striving for a good grade (the title story), he can be counted on to amaze, entertain, and illuminate the sapient condition.

If you crossed Franz Kafka with Thomas Ligotti and Warren Ellis—well, you'd be one sick puppy. But the result might be Rhys Hughes—at least in his particular authorial incarnation on display in *At the Molehills of Madness* (Pendragon Press, trade paperback, £7.99, 187 pages, ISBN 0-9538598-8-6). This volume assembles all of Hughes's horror or dark fantasy stories, and a splendidly scabrous and scaly and squamous lot they are. As Hughes explains in his "Pompous Afterword," this type of fiction is (or should be) a window into the neuroses of the author. Hughes has the courage of his convictions, and the talent to bring it all off. Just check out, for instance, "The Crippled Gollywog's Fox Hunt," which rakes the British upper classes over surreal coals.

Glen Hirshberg has immense range, sharp chops, an assured voice and vision. What more could you want from a short-story writer? He can do an over-the-top performance like "Safety Clowns," about drug dealers hidden in ice-cream trucks; or an atmospheric historical saga like "Devil's Smile," focused on new England maritime mysteries; or a Bradbury-style piece about a brother and sister dealing with the death of their beloved grandfather, as in "The Muldoon." All these Guises of Glen, and others, are on display in *American Morons* (Earthling Publications, hardcover, \$24.00, 191 pages, ISBN 0-9766339-8-1). You'd practically deserve the book's title if you didn't check it out.

### Anthologies

The four editors who have assembled *The James Tiptree Award Anthology 3* (Tachyon, trade paperback, \$14.95, 276 pages, ISBN 1-892391-41-4)—Karen Joy Fowler, Pat Murphy, Debbie Notkin, and Jeffrey D. Smith—wisely do not feel constrained by mere calendar years in assembling relevant stories and non-fiction. Thus, while we do indeed get to see the most recent prizewinners, we are also treated to such timeless goodies as Tiptree's own "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," and a 1990 essay by Dorothy Allison on Octavia Butler. The mix of old and new serves well the cause of highlighting gender issues in our field, and how it's been a long hard slog from days of willful ignorance and exclusion about such matters to a relatively enlightened present. Let a thousand bake sales bloom!

It's been much too long since the world has been graced by new fiction

from Rachel Pollack, and we have editors Richard Labonté and Lawrence Schimel to thank for the latest such eruption, to be found in the pages of their new anthology, *The Future Is Queer* (Arsenal Pulp Press, trade paperback, \$17.95, 213 pages, ISBN 978-155152-209-8). Pollack's primo story, "The Beatrix Gates," about an alchemical, transexual future, is the standout in my eyes. But every contributor here has intriguing things to say on the theme of differently gendered, differently sexed worlds. Writers such as Candas Jane Dorsey and L. Timmel Duchamp prove that any future worth living in, whatever its failures or successes, must be open to all persuasions.

Can one generalize usefully about the *Polyphony* series from Wheatland Press, assembled by Deborah Layne and Jay Lake, now that we've reached *Polyphony 6* (trade paper, \$18.95, 350 pages, ISBN 0-9755903-4-0)? I think so. First off, it's safe to say that they've lived up to the "many-voiced" promise of their name. This newest installment, like its predecessors, does not impose any ideological or formalistic party lines, but rather accepts all modes of fabulist fiction. You get pure SF, as in Richard Wadholm's "Orange Groves Out to the Horizon," Lovecraftian pastiche, as in Robert Freeman Wexler's "The Adventures of Philip Schuyler and the Dapper Marionette in the City of the Limbless Octopi," surreal goodness, as in Ray Vukceвич's "The Library of Pi," experimental New Wave montage, as in Forrest Aguirre's "Keys I Don't Remember," and so forth, through another dozen schools. Additionally, while all the authors and editors are plainly serious about the value of their stories, there's no literary pomposity or solemnity here. These writers believe in fiction

as ludic enlightenment. And finally, the editors do not run a closed shop. Veterans (Barry Malzberg, Jack Dann, Howard Waldrop, *et al*) consort happily with newcomers (Anna Tambour, Darin C. Bradley, Hannah Wolf Bowen, and others). Put all these generalizations together, and you've got one enticing salon.

### New Imprint, New Writer, New Thrills

It's always a grand moment when a major new line of SF/F/H books premieres, and our field, rather marvelously, has recently experienced it twice. There's the USA branch of the UK's long-running Orbit line, and we'll be encountering their offerings in later columns. Also originating in the UK, and distributed maximally in the USA, is Solaris, under the very capable hands of editor George Mann.

And one of the first volumes from Solaris consists of a debut novel. Now, that's leading with confidence and brio and forward-thinkingness.

*Thief with No Shadow* (mass-market paperback, \$7.99, 463 pages, ISBN 978-1-84416-469-1) by Emily Gee is, within the tight parameters it sets itself, a highly accomplished work, rewarding on any number of levels. It's a fable of sorts, almost something by the Brothers Grimm. As such, it shares affinities with work by Jane Yolen and Patricia McKillip. What it does not do is to build the typical extended subcreation of a Tolkienesque fantasy (and that's actually kinda refreshing). The world Gee sketches out is just dense enough not to put your foot through its scrim as you speed excitedly down the taut tightrope of plot. A name or two of a king and a kingdom. A sketched-in town. Some exot-

ic sentients to rival humans. A little bit of countryside. A couple of tales-within-the-tale as cultural touchstones. And a single mundane household that constitutes about 75 percent of what we see. Out of these components, Gee succeeds in fashioning a melodrama (in the best sense of the word) of sacrifice and redemption.

Our four main protagonists are two brother-sister pairings. Melke and Hantje are wraiths, humans possessed of the power to go "unseen" by others. Many wraiths naturally turn their talent for invisibility toward a life of crime. Melke and Hantje have higher moral standards. But, forced to flee to a strange land by political persecution, they reluctantly in their poverty detour to thieving. Their clumsy initial foray—Hantje's idea, really—goes dreadfully wrong when Hantje is captured by salamanders. (There are four supernatural races besides man: salamanders, lamias, gryphons, and psaarons, corresponding to fire, earth, air and water.) To rescue Hantje, Melke must steal a unique magical necklace from Bastian and Liana sal Vere, the scions of a cursed estate. Bastian has the power of conversing with dogs (his own dog Endal is one of the brightest lights in the book), while Liana is a healer.

Now the fates of the magical foursome are inextricably bound together by the thefts. Melke and Hantje end up on the ruined farm of the sal Veres, and the quartet undergo shifting balances and counterbalances of emotions, interspersed with bouts of danger.

Gee's schema for her tale, consciously or not, almost perfectly mirrors John Clute's famous stage-by-stage progress of the Ur-fantasy as "an earned passage from bondage."

As such, Gee's novel possesses a rich share of archetypical power. Although one might question whether the plethora of domestic scenes could have been trimmed a bit to avoid some small repetitiveness.

Her language is sharp and colorful, subtly shifting depending on whether Melke or Bastian hold the reins of POV. Her subplot in the village of Thierry proves to be integral to the main thread. And her depiction of the alien races is nicely otherworldly and erotically spooky, à la Yeats. It should also perhaps be mentioned that Gee inverts the standard damsel-under-threat-of-rape scenario in inventive ways, without being programmatic or tendentious.

Gee's first novel offers lots of pure fairytale resonance, and portends much fine work to come.

### The Sleeper at the Heart of the World

Haruki Murakami resembles no other creator possibly more than he resembles filmmaker David Lynch. Both men delight in the surreal, in bizarre patternings and weird symbols whose meanings linger on the edge of vocalizing, in depicting existential life-or-death quandaries, in walking the edge between innocence and perversity.

But in his newest novel, *After Dark* (Knopf, hardcover, \$22.95, 191 pages, ISBN 978-0-3072-6583-8), I believe Murakami is paying homage to a dif-

ferent filmmaker and to one of that director's more anomalous offerings: namely, Martin Scorsese and his 1985 film *After Hours*. Aside from the unmistakable similarity of titles, the action is just too kindred to be coincidental. Whereas in Scorsese's film, Griffin Dunne found himself embarked on a screwball nocturnal odyssey across SoHo, New York, in Murakami's book we find our characters swept up in a similar round of events in urban Japan. Perhaps a tad less slapstick and extroverted, and more sober and internalized—but kissing-cousin journeys nonetheless.

Mari, our heroine, is a shy, quiet nineteen-year-old student living with her parents. But this particular evening (the action of the book occupies a mere eight hours, each short chapter cued to a certain interval) she feels the overwhelming urge to escape for a time from a certain set of circumstances at home. So she resolves to spend the night awake, sitting in fast-food joints, reading. Unfortunately, she picks a rather rough neighborhood to frequent. There she meets a friendly, good-hearted musician named Takahashi. Her casual instant involvement with him sweeps her up in a sordid situation at a love hotel named Alphaville. The night will spool out from there, and we will ultimately get the sense that all the events cosmically revolve around Mari's sister, Eri, who has undertaken a vow to sleep indefinitely until her unstated problems are solved.

Eri proves to be rather like a cer-

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tain Dunsany figure: "The chief of the gods of Pegana is Mana-Yood-Sushai, who created the other gods and then fell asleep; when he wakes, he 'will make again new gods and other worlds, and will destroy the gods whom he hath made.'" Murakami slips back and forth across planes of existence, in classic butterfly-or-philosopher mode, employing the tactic of a nameless, first-person, bodiless narrator.

As always, Murakami's prose stylings and vocabulary (as ably translated by Jay Rubin) are extremely primal and spare, yet somehow cohering into subtle and colorful and beautiful cadenzas. He's the ultimate global cosmopolitan, in that his characters partake of a world-spanning set of touchstones. And yet there's something undeniably Asian and Japanese about his work—how could there not be?

Murakami specializes in pulling the rug out from under any sense of certainty his characters long for—and out from under the reader as well. As a character named Korogi observes, "The ground we stand on looks solid enough, but if something happens it can drop out right from under you. And once that happens, you've had it: things'll never be the same. All you can do is go on living alone down there in the darkness." (Recall that one of Murakami's most famous protagonists spent plenty of time literally immured in a well!) This is the most pessimistic formulation of Murakami's thesis, and Mari rightfully rejects Korogi's words to some degree. Mostly, this sense of unpredictability instead brings a kind of deliciously scary joy to his characters, who might often be stuck in a rut anyhow. If you survive your trials, you'll emerge somehow richer, even ennobled.

The French pioneered this kind of "anti-novel" half a century ago. (Murakami makes the tie explicit with "Alphaville" and a Godard reference.) Brian Aldiss did an SF one with *Report on Probability A* (1968). But Murakami imbues his books with less of the clinical and more of the humanistic. They're tender meditations on the impossibility and utter necessity of being human.

### The Artist and the Writer Were Lovers

The history of genre literature in the twentieth century needs to be documented even more extensively than it has been (and the semi-neglected visual aspect of the field even more so than the bibliographic side). The people who lived it, who contributed to it, are all mortal, and slipping away fast—as the obituaries in *Locus* and *Ansible* remind us every month. Much fascinating material about the larger-than-life characters who built the field of fantastical literature we all love is on the point of vanishing.

With this goal in mind, author Luis Ortiz has succeeded admirably in chronicling one of the more historically important and still vital careers—actually, joint careers—in the field, that of Ed and Carol Emshwiller. The main focus in *Emshwiller: Infinity X Two* (Nonstop Press, hardcover, \$39.95, 173 pages, ISBN 978-1-933065-08-3) is on polymath Ed, his paintings and films, but Carol's life as a writer is treated in honorable and comprehensive fashion as well. The loving synergy that was their marriage assumes almost the role of a third character in the biography.

Primarily, fans today know and re-



vere "Emsh" for his magazine and book illustrations, and this aspect of his career receives top billing and the largest amount of space. Printed on nice rich stock, the cleverly arrayed reproductions of Emsh's marvelous paintings leap off the page, conveying just what a unique visionary he was, and how his work helped codify the look and feel of modern SF. Ortiz's capsule descriptions of the paintings capture their most intimate craftsmanship and thematic secrets. Moreover, Emsh's non-SF art in the mystery and men's mags outlets gets a good airing as well.

But Ed Emshwiller eventually came to see himself essentially as a creator of films, and Ortiz documents Emsh's progress in this arena with lots of verve and insight. This part will be a revelation to most readers. And, as I mentioned above, Carol's arc of literary self-discovery, and her co-creative support for her husband, emerge in tandem with the main arguments.

Ortiz superbly evokes the vanished era of the fifties and sixties, arguably Emsh's heyday. He places Emsh's work into context with other leading artists of the time such as Richard Powers. And he conveys the struggles of a pair of creators who never had much regard for social conventions or riches, without either romanticizing or downplaying their chosen lifestyle.

This book is a model of the vibrant narrative scholarship the field needs.

### Cellulose in His Veins

An early example of such scholarship is Ron Goulart's classic survey, *Cheap Thrills*, originally published in 1972, when studies of pulp literature constituted but a fraction of

what we have today. The book was a landmark, due to Goulart's extensive primary reading among the many genres of pulp magazines, his affectionate tone, and his first-hand research conducted with the survivors of that milieu. He paved the way for later scholars.

Does his book hold up today? We have the chance to find out, thanks to Hermes Press, which has just reissued a splendid oversized hardcover reprint (\$49.99, 208 pages, ISBN 1-932563-75-X).

Visually, the book still delivers plenty of thrills. The covers that Goulart chose to reproduce are real winners, and not often duplicated in later volumes. (Oh, sure, there's some overlap, but you can never look at some of these specimens often enough.) The stock and reproduction is top-notch too. My one beef? No artist credits! It's an affront to these painters, and would have been quite easy to remedy.

The text, at this late date, is not going to deliver any major surprises. Although Goulart does manage to provide a tidbit or two I had not encountered before. I never knew, for instance, that Doc Savage's early appearance was based on Clark Gable's. But additionally, and more vitally, we get Goulart's analysis of societal trends, marketplace conditions, literary fads and fashions, and a host of other pertinent matters. These insights remain exemplary.

Lastly, the final section of the book reproduces correspondence that Goulart received from various pulpsters during his researches. Seeing these typed letters from the late sixties, with their strikeovers and penned corrections, is now almost akin to examining the pulps themselves: an exercise in nostalgia and melancholy and joy.

### Zeno Has the Answers?

Is philosophy a science? It's a discipline, certainly, and much good SF has been written to examine philosophical questions, mainly in the areas of ontology and epistemology. Where would PKD be, for instance, if he couldn't play out his thought experiments on the nature of reality?

In any case, I probably shouldn't push too hard to label Paul Hornschemeier's *The Three Paradoxes* (Fantagraphics, hardcover, \$14.95, 80 pages, ISBN 978-1-56097-653-0) as SF, since that's likely a betrayal of its real nature as autobiography. Still, it does deal in a genuine speculative manner with Zeno's famous three paradoxes involving motion and change, as exemplified in some lived-in historical moments from the life of its narrator.

We encounter young Chicago artist Paul as he's visiting his parents in his childhood town in Ohio. He struggles with a graphic novel story he's currently composing; he takes a walk with his father; he has flashbacks to his childhood; then he drives away when his visit is over, to meet a woman he's never before seen in the flesh. A simple enough arc, but one that becomes dense with interplay between memory and consciousness, illustrating the mutable nature of reality.

Hornschemeier's masterstroke in the telling of this tale involves his formalistic gameplaying. There are five modes or visual styles on display here, all superbly rendered. Predominant is the naturalistic mode that's used for the realtime parts, reminiscent a bit of Dan Clowes's work. Then there's the naked, cartoony pencils of the graphic novel in progress. There's some *Dennis the Menace*-style art for one flashback thread. There's a

kind of early-sixties romance comic or EC comics look for another flashback. And finally, we travel back to the philosophers of ancient Greece via a kind of *Peanuts* blended with *Classics Illustrated* format.

These mixed media, so to speak, convey the varying levels of reality, which begin to bleed into one another, especially when the *Dennis*-type characters are seen in the background of a naturalistic panel. Such a formalistic achievement conveys thematic points in ways more subtle—and, paradoxically, more forceful—than most strictly textual material could.

As Jonathan Lethem says in his blurb for this neat book, there's no ultimate resolution of all these matters. But simply watching the heretofore hidden machinery of the cosmos and consciousness in action through one man's life is reward enough.

### Dark Companion

Another volume at hand is both autobiography and more than autobiography. In fact, with *Dark Reflections* (Carroll & Graf, trade paperback, \$15.95, 295 pages, ISBN 978-0-78671-947-1), our old pal Samuel Delany, proving himself still an innovator after such a long and illustrious career, seems to have invented a new format entirely: call it "counterfactual autobiography" if you will.

What precisely do I mean by this?

Well, first consider counterfactual fiction, or uchronias, or alternate histories, as we commonly know them in the genre. They are thought experiments designed to highlight how subtle (or major) alterations in recorded consensus events can lead to strange and different and unexpected outcomes.

In this book, Delany has done a counterfactual run on his own life.

Here's a quick snapshot of the protagonist of *Dark Reflections*, Arnold Hawley: he's a gay black man, a poet, who teaches on the side. He lives in a book-cluttered, rent-controlled apartment in New York City. His aunt is a charismatic, educated figure in his life. He had a brief marriage to a young woman when he too was young, followed by a nervous breakdown. He's won an award or two, and has a good critical reputation, but his work is considered rather abstruse.

Wow, you think, that's pretty close to Delany's C.V. This is going to be a novelized version of Chip's actual autobiography, *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988). But you couldn't be more wrong.

For despite the surface affinities, Hawley is almost the anti-Delany. (He's the "dark reflection" of the author, although the multivalent title here also refers to one of Hawley's own books.) And his life's story, told in exquisite and aching detail, serves to illuminate both Delany's own career and vast sociocultural-political wavefronts.

Born five years prior to Delany, in 1937 versus 1942, Hawley is just older enough to be stuck in the binding mentality of the closeted gay man. And his natural temperament reinforces this isolation. Timid, fearful, full of misinformation, Hawley never embraces his sexuality. Instead, he buries his passion, deliberately killing it and sublimating it after some hasty, botched experiments.

And esthetically speaking, Hawley is no innovator like Delany. He's rather stodgy and traditional in his writing, his likes and dislikes, his literary heroes. But he does proudly embrace the African-American experi-

ence in American literature, and thus his stifled, less-than-ideal career will serve as a useful vessel for Delany's history of change in the field, how cultural attitudes have progressed over the latter half of the twentieth century and into the new one.

And although there is nothing overtly fantastical about this book, this very impulse of examining sociopolitical trends and paradigm shifts through representative characters is SF's core methodology.

But let me also be clear on this: the main thrust here is toward a portrait of Hawley and those in his sphere, and Delany does a superb job limning a writer's marginal life. One might think of Saul Bellow or Philip Roth or John Updike—if one didn't know that Delany himself has done this task ably time and again, only in more fantastical settings. Another fruitful comparison is John Crowley's *The Translator* (2002), which likewise evokes a vanished era.

Delany's writing retains its immaculate sheen when it comes to depicting action, texture, physical reality. Hawley might be a failed poet to some extent, in the world's eyes, but he still possesses a poet's sharp perceptions, and Delany crystallizes Hawley's vision for us with precise and robust language.

This book supplements Delany's previous assessments of contemporary society through a most unlikely messenger—one who comes fully alive even though he is living a buried life.

By the way: Carroll & Graf itself is now a dead imprint, abandoned in the wake of various corporate mergers. It would be a shame if Delany's book got lost in these maneuvers, and I suspect that this edition will soon be very collectible. For all those reasons and more, you need to grab a copy. ○

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Winter is a great time for indoor weekends with other SF enthusiasts, especially in northern areas. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## JANUARY 2008

4-6—GAFilk. For info, write: 890-F Atlanta #150, Roswell GA 30075. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [gafilk.org](http://gafilk.org). (E-mail) [info@gafilk.org](mailto:info@gafilk.org). Con will be held in: Atlanta GA (if city omitted, same as in address) at a venue to be announced. Guests will include: none announced. Filk (science fiction & fantasy folksinging).

18-20—ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. [stlyag.org](http://stlyag.org). Marriott, Troy MI. Westerfeld, Larbaestier, Scalzi.

18-20—RustyCon. [rustycon.com](http://rustycon.com). Airport Radisson. General SF & fantasy convention.

18-20—MarsCon, 4618 Olde Stone Way, Chesapeake VA 23321. [marscon.net](http://marscon.net). Williamsburg VA.

18-21—Artsia, Bldg. 600, #322, 1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge MA 02139. [artsia.org](http://artsia.org). Cambridge MA. L. Gilman, Marrus.

25-27—VeriCon, HRSFA, 4 Univ. Hall, Cambridge MA 02138. [vericon.org](http://vericon.org). Harvard Univ. Lois Lowry, S. November.

25-27—ConFild. [www.confild.org](http://www.confild.org). Renton WA. Steve MacDonald, Arlene (Callie) Hills. SF and fantasy folksinging.

## FEBRUARY 2008

1-3—COSine, c/o 1245 Allegheny Dr., Colorado Springs CO 80919. [firstfridayfandom.org](http://firstfridayfandom.org). M. Resnick. SF/Fantasy.

8-10—CapriCon, [capricom.org](http://capricom.org). Sheraton, Arlington Heights (Chicago) IL.

8-10—OwlCon. [owlcon.com](http://owlcon.com). Held at Rice University in Houston TX. For fans of gaming, fantasy and science fiction.

8-10—IkdCon, Box 1641, Bastrop TX 78602. [ikdcon.com](http://ikdcon.com). Austin TX. Japanese pop-culture and animation convention.

15-17—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. [boskone.org](http://boskone.org). Westin Waterfront, Boston MA. SF.

15-17—Farpoint, 11708 Troy Ct, Waldorf MD 20601. [farpoint.com](http://farpoint.com). Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Trek, etc.

15-17—VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (417) 886-7219. [visioncon.net](http://visioncon.net).

15-17—KatsuCon, Box 79, Clarksville MD 21029. [katsucon.org](http://katsucon.org). Omni Shoreham Hotel, Washington DC. Anime/manga.

22-24—SheVaCon, Box 416, Verona VA 24482. [shevacon.org](http://shevacon.org). Holiday Inn Tanglewood, Roanoke VA. Joe Keener.

22-24—Con DFW, 750 S. Main #14, Keller TX 76248. [www.condfw.org](http://www.condfw.org). Dallas TX. General SF & fantasy convention.

22-24—ConNooga. [connoogs.com](http://connoogs.com). Chattanooga Choo Choo Hotel, Chattanooga TN. A "multi-genre" convention.

## MARCH 2008

7-9—PortmeirCon, 871 Clover Dr., N. Wales PA 19454. [portmeircon.com](http://portmeircon.com). Portmeirion, UK. "The Prisoner" TV show.

14-16—LunaCon, Box 432, Bronx NY 10465. [lunacon.org](http://lunacon.org). Hilton, Rye NY (near NYC). Carey, Kukas, Siclari, Howlett.

14-16—StellarCon, Box F-4, EUC, c/o UNCG, Greensboro NC 27413. [stellarcon.org](http://stellarcon.org). Radisson, High Point NC.

14-16—MillenniCon, 5818 Wilm. Pike #122, Centerville OH 45459. (513) 659-2558. [millennicon.org](http://millennicon.org). Cincinnati OH.

14-16—OmegaCon. [omegacon.com](http://omegacon.com). Birmingham AL. Ben Bova, Alan Dean Foster, David Drake, Stephen Brust.

14-16—RevelCon, c/o Box 130602, Houston TX 77219. [severalunlimited.com/revelcon](http://severalunlimited.com/revelcon). Low-key relax-a-con.

20-23—NorwesCon, Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. (206) 270-7850. [norwescon.org](http://norwescon.org). Seattle WA. D. Simmons, Ciruelo.

## AUGUST 2008

6-10—Dervention 3, Box 1349, Denver CO 80201. [dervention3.org](http://dervention3.org). Bujold, Sternbach, Whitmore. WorldCon. \$130+.

## AUGUST 2009

6-10—Anticipation, CP 105, Montreal QE H4A 3P4. [anticipation.ca](http://anticipation.ca). Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US\$150.

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# NEXT ISSUE

## MARCH ISSUE

In our lead story for March, popular and prolific UK writer **Brian Stableford** returns to the near-future setting of stories like "Hot Blood" with another carefully plotted and chilling example of the possible effects advanced biotech might have on humanity. In "Following the Pharmers," the biotech can be as subtle as a flower's perfume on the wind, yet still be insidiously harmful to humans exposed to the scent. It's an exciting and compulsively readable story, though we at *Asimov's* earnestly hope this kind of future remains wholly fictitious!

## ALSO IN MARCH

Marching on, we find **Cat Rambo**, prolific semi-prozine contributor and up-and-coming talent, making her *Asimov's* debut with a charming and funny tale about an intergalactic shopkeeper who finds all four of his hands full as "Kallakak's Cousins" descend upon his threatened livelihood; **Elizabeth Bear** joins us again with an unsettling Lovecraft-inspired tale called "Shoggoths in Bloom," in which the words "stygian," "Cyclopiian," and "shambling" are *not* used (we promise!); Ian Creasey plumbs the darker side of life when a loved one is lost for good in "This Is How It Feels"; **Tom Purdom**, whose "The Mists of Time" was one of our most popular stories with readers last year, returns with the exciting science-fiction adventure, complete with swashbuckling augmented humans, "Sepoy Fidelities"; **Sue Burke**, whose name ought to be familiar to fans of the poetry in *Asimov's*, makes her short fiction debut here with "Spiders," a poetic and evocative tale of familial relationships on a recently colonized world; and **Carol Emshwiller** returns in an American gothic style, with a tale of strange nomadic beings somehow both human and inhuman and their search for a permanent home—a home that can be found only by "The Master of the Road to Nowhere"!

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

In his "Reflections" column, **Robert Silverberg** trawls online flea-markets seeking peculiar "Space Junk for Sale"; **James Patrick Kelly** examines a mysterious sub-genre of SF called "Mundane" in *On the Net*; **Peter Heck** brings you "On Books"; plus an array of pleasant poetry by many of your favorite poets. Look for our March issue at your newsstand on January 29, 2008. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—by mail or online, in varying formats, including downloadable forms, by going to our website, ([www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com))—and make sure that you don't miss any of the great stuff we have coming up!

## COMING SOON

brain-balming stories by **Kate Wilhelm**, **Barry B. Longyear**, **Ian R. MacLeod**, **S.P. Somtow**, **Kathleen Ann Goonan**, **Neal Barrett, Jr.**, **Kij Johnson**, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **Nancy Kress**, **Steven Utley**, **Catherine Wells**, **Jack Skillingstead**, **Robert Reed**, and many others!



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